



## Your desk or mine, honey?

### Office affairs of the heart often lead to heartbreak

By **RASHIDA DHOOMA**  
Toronto Sun

Office sex. It's as seductive as office politics, and if we are to believe the sizzling allegations swirling around the White House, even the U.S. president has been indulging.

Experts say that the workplace is ripe for romance and titillating trysts. Although office play runs contrary to conventional wisdom, studies show that there's a whole lot of lovin' going on.

Psychology Today reports that 80% of workers have either observed or taken part in a romantic relationship at work.

It can start as innocently as a brush of the shoulders, stolen glances and working in close proximity. Pretty soon it's not just the photocopier that's overheating.

Whether it's a long-term commitment or an illicit fling, it seems work has become a "safe" place to find a willing partner.

Why is the office such a sexy place?

"In the name of professionalism, people put their best foot forward at work. They make an effort to look good and are on their best behavior," says Dr. Lisa Miller, a psychologist at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in New York City.

"You come home and 'flop'. You change into your sweats and wind down. At work, he sees people all dressed up. Which scenario is more appealing?" Miller asks.

Competence is also an aphrodisiac, and people are aroused by success, she says.

The fear of sexually transmitted diseases is one reason for the shift of the dating landscape from the bar scene, personal ads and blind dates to the office front.

#### **Close proximity**

"You're familiar with the person, and also have a common interest -- work," says Marilyn Belleghem, an Oakville marriage and family therapist, and consultant to families in business.

Employees spend more hours a day in close proximity with their co-workers than with their spouses emotionally, physically and intellectually, she says, and many underestimate or don't

understand the sexual feelings when working under such conditions.

"Married men especially, who see themselves as happy, do not often see the sexual cues targeted at them, and when it hits, they fall in love and leave their wives and children, leaving lots of destruction in families," she says.

Belleghem, who is often called in by companies to help to resolve an affair, usually consults with the person in higher authority and does a "reality check."

"Sometimes, one of the persons involved might reconsider the affair once they see a lawyer and realize the financial implications of a divorce," she says.

"Sneaking around" is the ultimate aphrodisiac as some people strive to keep an office romance secret, Belleghem says.

"They find it incredibly sexy and stimulating to be introduced to a colleague and pretend as if they're meeting for the first time. Later, they giggle about it in bed," she says.

Then there are those who "let their head slip out of gear" and fulfill their lust in stairwells (Belleghem met someone who got caught), in broom closets, the photocopier room and behind locked office doors.

"It's a big risk, and it scares the daylights out of them, but for many it's a turn-on. They find it exciting and stimulating, and get aroused," she says.

While some companies have strict policies against staff dating -- and forbid even married couples from working together -- for the most part, employers are pretty relaxed on the issue.

"As long as there doesn't appear to be a conflict of interest, who dates who is none of our business," says Rob McLeod, spokesman for CIBC.

However, in a "boss/subordinate relationship, understandably there would be some concern and we would sit down with both parties on how to reach an amicable solution," he adds.

### **'A natural activity'**

Ford Canada doesn't have a formal policy on dating either.

"We do have married couples that work within the organizations, and perhaps a degree of dating which is a natural activity," says Ford spokesman John Arnone.

Relationship and business consultant Donna Messer says getting romantically involved at work is courting disaster.

"It starts out as having the common interest being work, but after a while, these people usually find they're not as compatible as they originally thought," she says.

That's just one of her arguments against office dating. The biggest letdown is when a relationship sours, she says.

"Somebody suffers, and it isn't usually the person in higher authority," she adds.

Belleghem, however, says some people don't mind working as a subordinate to a lover, and might actually find the experience stimulating, particularly if they're looking for a strong partner.

Even a man, who's more likely to feel threatened by a female lover as boss, will sometimes not mind if the woman assumes responsibility.

"Most likely he had a strong mother, and he likes to know his limits," she adds. "Lots of men are looking at release from being the primary breadwinner."

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