

Office spouses: A boon for productivity or a mess for home-life?

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Columnist: Work/life issues

If you have a working partner or spouse, have you ever considered where he or she is most workdays? Actually the question should be, have you ever considered with whom your partner or spouse spends most of his or her time at work? In a survey conducted last January by Vault Inc., a New York-based career research firm, 32 percent of employees acknowledged having an “office spouse.” An office spouse appears to be a person with whom an employee of the opposite sex spends limitless amounts of time collaborating, sharing ideas and doing whatever it takes to get the job done. For some, it may be spending the most waking work-week hours together, traveling long hours to and from business appointments, or engaging in occasional conversations during non-work hours. For others, it might be collaborating on various types of job-related projects. Ah, you might be thinking an “office spouse” is code language for an office love affair. Not at all, say experts.

Men and women have always enjoyed friendships at work. However, it seems that as men and women are becoming more equally distributed within the ranks of organizations, male and female employees are increasingly working as peers. In a recent article on “office spouse” social phenomena in *Globe and Mail*, a Canadian newspaper, Julian Barling, associate dean and professor of organizational behaviour and psychology at the Queens School of Business in Kingston, Ontario, is noted as saying that “it is not surprising that men and women develop strong personal bonds when they are forced to spend long hours together and to work as a tightly knit team.”

Research suggests that having a good friend at work is highly associated with job satisfaction, productivity and employee loyalty. Findings from a Gallup Organization’s study of 4.5 million U.S. workers between 2002 and 2004 suggest that 30 percent of respondents have a good friend at work. Among this subset of employees, 60 percent reported they were satisfied in their jobs. So it seems having a good friend is good for employees and good for workplaces.

But what happens when employees’ romantic spouses or partners become suspicious of the “office spouse?” Or what happens when office rumors start circulating about a close male-female office relationship? Experts on work behaviors and relationships suggest several strategies for dispelling negative rumors at home or at work. For instance,

Clear the air. At home, discuss the work relationship with your spouse or partner as soon as possible. Be clear that the relationship is a platonic working relationship. Do the same with the office manager. Tell the manager there is nothing inappropriate about the relationship. Be sure to secure the manager’s and organization’s support for the work friendship.

Invite others in. Plan a dinner party so your romantic partner/spouse can get to know your close on-the-job associate. Dispelling any myths about the office spouse may help to circumvent any possible suspicion from your loved one. At work, exclusive relationships should be avoided. Invite co-workers to join you and your office spouse for lunch or for an after-work social hour.

Common sense rules. When the office spouse pair gets together with their “real” partners/spouses, inside jokes or discussions about work should be avoided. The goal is to make your “real” partner/spouse feel

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included, not excluded, from your relationship with your work spouse. On the job, when collaborating with a large team, avoid always sitting next to your office spouse, and avoid too much physical contact or intimate chat.

Other strategies that organizations can employ to minimize negative consequences associated with close office male-female contact include: set clear office policy about employee conduct; have a strategy in place if other employees express discomfort about the behaviors of a close male-female working team; and resist the temptation to discourage a close male-female working relationship as it first develops. Talking with the pair in question is a great approach to better understanding the relationship.

Platonic working relationships between men and women in the workplace have always existed. However, as greater numbers of women fill positions throughout all levels of organizations and as companies demand more from their employees, workers may find themselves heavily dependant on an opposite sex co-worker to achieve work related objectives. Cultivating these healthy working relationships among co-workers may reap many benefits for the company, especially if romantic partners and spouses understand the meaning of these complex couplings.

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