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# Boss's Memo: Go Ahead, Date (With My Blessing)

By [STEPHANIE ROSENBLOOM](#)

SOON after word spread that Sarah Kay and Matt Lacks were conducting an office romance, Ms. Kay found herself in the office of the director of human resources. There was a time when such a meeting would have signaled a death knell for the relationship, and even jeopardized the employees' careers.

Yet as Ms. Kay, 29, cheerfully recounted, the human resources director told her, "We're just all really glad that you made a friend."

That some people believe they can openly date co-workers without endangering their job reflects what those who study the workplace and several surveys suggest: the conventional wisdom about dating the heart-stirrer in the next cubicle is going the way of Wite-Out.

Despite years of stern warnings about the pitfalls of seeking love in the shadow of the water cooler — touched off by the heightened consciousness of sexual harassment in the 1990s — more workers think dating a colleague is not only acceptable, but logical. Those who follow the evolution of the workplace romance say the stigma may be fading because the line between business and personal life is blurring among younger workers. They are working longer hours. Their workplaces encourage collaboration. And, of course, most single people are in the work force.

"I graduated from college seven and a half years ago, and with the exception of maybe two people, I've only dated people I work with," said Ms. Kay, who has never lost sleep wondering whether workplace dating was professional or even allowed.

Ms. Kay and Mr. Lacks, 26, employees at the Jewish Community Center in Manhattan, shared lunch breaks, dating war stories and daily e-mail lists about things that made them happy — the ocean at night, macaroni and cheese, hooded sweatshirts. "We didn't hide how much time we spent together," Ms. Kay said.

Last year, Mr. Lacks, who had left the community center after getting a dream job at a sports marketing agency, proposed to Ms. Kay. In the last three years, 14 other employees of the community center have

married or moved in together.

“I am aware that there are potential issues,” said the center’s executive director, Joy Levitt, but “when they meet each other and fall in love it only enhances their commitment to their jobs.”

Ms. Kay and Mr. Lacks had the boss’s blessing. Literally. Ms. Levitt, a rabbi, will marry the couple Nov. 17.

The publication this month of [Clarence Thomas](#)’s memoir, “My Grandfather’s Son” (HarperCollins), has returned to news pages, in vivid detail, the memory of his confrontation with [Anita Hill](#) in 1991 and the moment when most Americans became educated about sexual harassment. In the years that followed, harassment claims poured in to regulatory agencies, and newspapers published accounts of multimillion-dollar court judgments against employers. Businesses rushed to write anti-harassment policies and to enroll employees in sensitivity training. Workplace relationships, even those not between a boss and a junior employee, were largely conducted surreptitiously.

In 1999, when Whitney Chianese, of Rye, N.Y., began dating the man who is now her husband at a sports marketing company, “it was very hush-hush,” she said.

“It was known within our inner circle at work,” said Ms. Chianese, 28, the founder of [ThreeLovelies.com](#), a Web site that plans to sell gear for moms, “but it was like ‘how comfortable do you feel with senior management knowing?’”

As it turns out, more comfy than one might think. An online survey this year by [CareerBuilder.com](#) found a significant drop in the number of workers who are keeping an office romance a secret, down from 46 percent in 2005 to 34 percent in 2007. About half of workers say they have dated a co-worker, according to CareerBuilder.com surveys conducted annually for the last three years.

The taboo of the affaire de cubicle has lost some potency, but exactly how much is difficult to gauge as statistics vary from survey to survey. Still, “you see quite a bit of emphasis on work-life balance,” said Jennifer Sullivan, who oversaw the CareerBuilder.com survey, conducted by Harris Interactive. Companies, she said, are allowing more flexibility versus having a handbook dictate how employees need to behave and what those relationships should look like in the office.

As a result, she added, “people are much more open about their relationships.”

Every workplace culture is different, with some less tolerant of office dating. A survey last year by the Society for Human Resource Management and [CareerJournal.com](#) found that, over all, there was fading concern about potential sexual harassment allegations (77 percent were concerned about it in 2005, down from 95 percent in 2001) but increasing concern that office dating could cause conflict among jilted lovers.

To that end there are now magazine articles and Web sites that not only condone going to work and picking up more than a paycheck, but that also offer advice on how to successfully do so. A book coming out next month, a kind of "The Rules" for the office, would have been difficult to publish in 1991.

In "Office Mate: The Employee Handbook for Finding — and Managing — Romance on the Job" (Adams Media, November 2007), the writers Stephanie Losee and Helaine Olen (who both married colleagues) say the workplace is the new village — and therefore an ideal place to find love.

Ms. Losee said the growing acceptance of office dating (not to be confused with a hookup) is something of a backlash against dating Web sites. "I'm not surprised that the Internet has not proven to be the locus of community we thought it would be," she said, citing the notion in Robert D. Putnam's book, "Bowling Alone," that "we need to be physically near each other to feel happier and better in our everyday lives."

"Where do we still have that physical proximity of neighborhoodliness?" she said. "It's at the office."

People who work together have time to get to know one another, Ms. Losee and Ms. Olen said in interviews, to see how potential paramours behave under stress or how they treat the secretary. Unlike online daters, singles in the workplace are less likely to dismiss a good catch based on snap judgments. Take Ms. Losee's husband, who is shorter than her and who liked to wear an oversize linen jacket, she said, that leaves something to be desired. "If I met him at a bar I would not have given him a chance," she said.

So perhaps, the authors suggest, a gal need not kiss as many frogs if she is allowed to kiss Kenneth from payroll. But does that mean she should?

"Etiquette doesn't say you shouldn't do it," said Peter Post, a director of the Emily Post Institute and an author of "The Etiquette Advantage in Business" (HarperCollins, 2005). "It's not 'Bad boy, bad girl.' It's 'Be smart.'"

For anyone considering an office romance, Mr. Post suggests, first check the company policy. If it is not forbidden, the rules to follow should be obvious. Keep the smooching and goo-goo talk at home. If ardor chills, resist the urge to throw a stapler. Recalling the souring of one office relationship he witnessed, Mr. Post said, "At one point the president of the company came up to me and said, 'you could cut the atmosphere in here with a knife.'"

Attempts to regulate office relationships are not just meant to avoid sexual harassment claims. Romance among colleagues can lead to unfair and unethical treatment, and to a poisonous atmosphere that affects many others. In a book to be published later this month, "Giving Notice: Why the Best and the Brightest Leave the Workplace and How You Can Help Them Stay" (Jossey-Bass), Freeda Kapor Klein explains

how unproductive, even hostile, a work environment can be if there is a culture of crudeness or rampant extramarital affairs, especially those that cross lines of power and authority.

Yet Ms. Kapor Klein, the founder of the Level Playing Field Institute, a nonprofit organization that promotes fairness in the workplace and in society, said that forbidding office dating, even between superiors and subordinates, is no solution. "The real issue is not that they're sleeping with each other," she said. "The real issue is that their emotional attachment to each other may get in the way of their business judgment."

She advises companies to write policies stating that workers will not be fired for dating, but can be fired for not disclosing and mitigating it. If romances are outlawed, "you merely drive that situation underground," she said. "It's the dishonesty that poisons the work environment, not the relationship."

Full disclosure: Ms. Kapor Klein is married to her former chief executive, Mitchell Kapor, the founder of Lotus Development Corporation and the designer of Lotus 1-2-3, the software application. Ms. Kapor Klein said she and Mr. Kapor did not begin dating until more than a decade after they met at the office (she was the director of organizational development and training).

"He indicated that if he weren't married I was somebody he would be interested in," Ms. Kapor Klein said. "I took that as a world-class compliment. Not harassing. Not coercive. And that was the end of it for 12 years."

Today they are husband and wife. So is the woman to whom blue-chip companies turn for policy advice in favor of office love?

"Keep in mind the current success rate of marriage is about 50-50," Ms. Kapor Klein said. "Just thinking purely in terms of probability, what do you think the odds are of an office romance working out? Has to be less than 50-50. So before you rush ahead, think about how it's going to feel to sit in this weekly staff meeting with somebody who you had a miserable breakup with and who you actually wish didn't exist on the planet. Think about it. And then take a reasonable risk."

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