

# Extreme Romance 2001

**Y**es, once again, it's Valentine month and time for Working Life's status check on romance in the office, or lack thereof. Are people afraid to flirt, afraid to make a move lest they be accused of political incorrectness at the very least or sexual harassment at worst? Recently in a forum on various training topics, we asked a consultant who specializes in creating "safe work environments" whether any flirting at all is acceptable in the workplace—considering that we are men and women, we are grown-ups, and we do spend many hours a day together. She hedged, she grimaced, she obviously wrestled with the question, and finally answered, "No," but reluctantly, with a nod to our humanness. A male consultant at the table said, "Shucks. That takes all the fun out."

Remember Prohibition? People started making bootleg liquor. Remember the Vietnam War protests? People went underground. Welcome to Extreme Romance 2001.

## He-mail, she-mail

**A**t least 30,000 busy working Japanese men are dating women they've never seen, according to a report in *Wired News* by Michelle Delio. A mobile-phone matchmaking service, Love By Mail, lets men choose a girlfriend from a list, including a bartender, a flight attendant, an office worker, and a teacher. Once a man makes his selection, they start dating via email on the man's Web-enabled cell phone. And just like in face-to-face life, virtual dating has its rules.

Men who move too fast or not fast enough get angry emails in response. Men who talk about sports or plead having to work too often soon get no

response. Men who hit just the right romantic note are rewarded by romantic emails in kind and their sweetie's "most intimate secrets."

There's just one fly in the tofu: The women are preprogrammed computer scripts. That's right; they don't exist.

Does that bother the men? Apparently not. Says one, "I dated Yumi for awhile, and I have to confess I became very attached to her. It was sometimes hard to remember that she wasn't real. She would yell at me and ignore me the exact same way as all of my other girlfriends have. Finally I decided to stop the relationship. It was too draining."

Another Love By Mail user says the experience is almost like having a mistress. "You have the happiness of a secret woman, a hidden relationship, with none of the fear that your wife will find out and be angry. My grandfather had the geisha, my father had the bar hostesses, and I have Love By Mail."

I-mode, the company that provides Love By Mail, also offers a service

called "kind advice" about love, which promises guidance on everything from what to wear on a date to how to act in a restaurant. You can also check predictions for the success of a relationship based on the other person's horoscope and blood type. There are also i-mode advice services for people who are having trouble at work and who don't know what to do after work.

## Musical pairs

**B**ack in America, socializing for busy professionals has reached an efficient new level: Speed dating.

A new crop of dating services has honed the arranged introduction to a fine—no, make that fast—art. On a recent episode of HBO's *Sex and the City*, Miranda, the 16-hour-work-day law firm partner, attends a speed-dating get-together. With a nametag stuck to her chest, she meets a series of somewhat vetted potential partners until she hears bells ringing. No, not the kind that signal love at first sight but a real bell. It's six minutes to a guy, then the bell rings, he moves to the next table where another woman waits wearing a nametag, and the next Mr. Maybe sits down. Just enough time to tell each one she's a lawyer and then see his eyes drift. She finally connects when she tells one guy she's a flight attendant.

OK, so that's TV, but the real-life thing works about the same: six minutes to an encounter until everyone has met, then you check *yes* or *no* whether you ever want to see any of these people again, and the service matches you up—you guessed it!—via email.

Call it e-dating. So, might as well get the email-ready phone and vibrating pager and call it love.

Speed dating [www.briefencounters2001.com](http://www.briefencounters2001.com)