

## Dangerous Liaisons

**Romance** in the workplace is the topic for this month's Working Life. That may seem to be an odd bedfellow for a more serious topic in this issue—sexual harassment in the workplace.

But one of the problems with harassment is how to distinguish it from harmless flirtation and romantic attraction, which inevitably occur when people work together.

After all, it is the Valentine month. Last February, we had a lot of calls to our "Voice Mail" phone line about office romances—pro and con, successful and failed. Most callers approved of them; the success rate was about 50 percent.

It's time to take another pulse.

### Love at First Byte

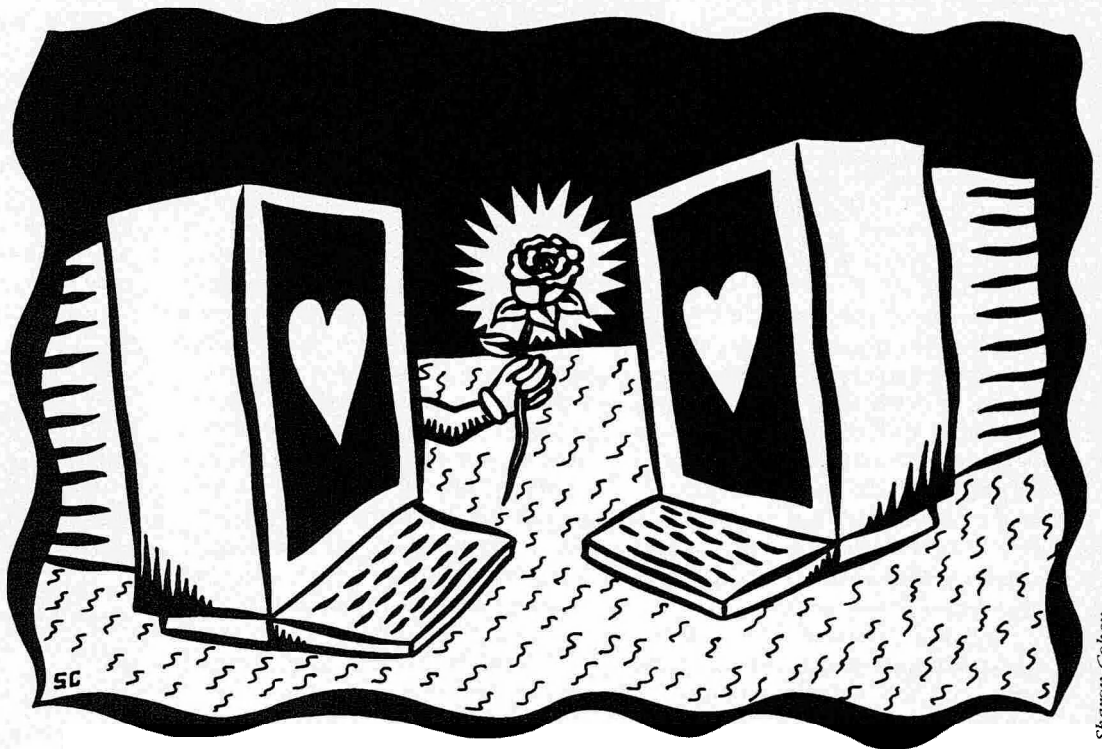
Like everything else these days, workplace romance has been transformed by technology. Exchanging meaningful glances over the water cooler is passe. Even the fairly recent practice of faxing photos to prospective dates has become antiquated.

Enter BBSs, or bulletin board systems, which provide all kinds of information via personal computer networks—including dating data.

There are literally thousands of BBSs and users across the country. One such system is Adult Bliss, an adults-only eight-line chat board that has 1,500 subscribers.

Another system, Prodigy, allows you to leave a message in a special-interest category, such as its food and wine club. Prodigy's "bouncers" screen the messages and erase any that violate its rules and standards.

Generally, board members chat with other subscribers via their computer screens, and then agree to exchange phone numbers or meet



Sharon Cohen

face-to-face. Some systems provide interested parties with an electronic version of a first date. The couple simply switches from the main line to a private channel.

Users say that BBSs are less superficial than other means of meeting, because initial attraction isn't based on physical appearance.

Intrigued? You'll need a PC, a modem, and a telecommunications software package—such as ProComm for IBM compatibles and Microphone or Red Ryder for the Macintosh.

Some popular BBSs are CompuServe (800/848-8199), Prodigy (800/822-6922), ECHO (212/255-3839), and GENie (800/638-9636). Fees vary. The average cost is \$50 to sign up and \$10 per month.

It's the ultimate blind date.

### Updating

Despite the volatile issue of sexual harassment, dating people you work with is becoming more acceptable. So says a recent Gallup Organization survey of 700 employees. More than half of those polled approve of workplace dating.

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Office romances are more acceptable in the Midwest than on the East Coast. No one knows why.

## R-E-S-P-E-C-T (Aretha Franklin)

"Say, are you wearing panties?" asks a male supervisor of a female employee to whom he's just given an assignment.

"Yes, you do have two fine points. They look wonderful," says a male executive to a female attorney in response to her business presentation.

Clearly, such remarks (actual comments in both incidences) are inappropriate and can be construed as sexual harassment. But what about this: "Some people seek the woman; I seek the child inside. With gentleness and deepest respect."

That was a message from a male co-worker to a woman who is suing for sexual harassment for sending her that letter and others like it. If it's unwelcome, such attention is more predatory than poetic.

Yet, sexual harassment may often be in the eye of the beholder. Some experts argue that government regulations can't—and shouldn't—proscribe social interaction between the sexes. What's more, too stringent rules may cause discrimination against women.

For example, male co-workers feel comfortable inviting each other out for drinks after work. If men are afraid to extend such invitations to female co-workers, women may be denied opportunities to network.

When does an invitation become a proposition? When does a look become a leer? When does a romantic overture become sexual harassment?

One factor clouding the issue is that men tease and joke more often than women do, says ArLyne Diamond, a Santa Clara, California, consultant who conducts training programs on sexual harassment. Men tend to regard such teasing as benign.

Should men and women avoid making personal comments to co-workers? It's a matter of degree, says Diamond.

"It's one thing to say, 'That's a nice suit you're wearing today.' But

if a man says to a woman just before a major presentation, 'Gee, you look really cute,' that's all wrong."

That would be patronizing and it implies the woman's appearance is more important than the quality of her work. Such comments, even though they aren't overtly sexual, may fall under the umbrella of sexual harassment, according to accepted guidelines.

Most, but not all, sexual harassment is directed toward women by men. However, fewer than 1 percent of men are chronic harassers, claim researchers. Experts advise that the best way for anyone to handle the problem is to make his or her feelings known at the first incident.

Simply say, "When you (call me honey, tell risqué jokes, or whatever), it makes me uncomfortable." If the first offense involves touching, scream and say, "Gosh, you startled me," and then quickly move away.

If those techniques don't put an end to the behavior, report it to the appropriate person.

For more on the subject, the video, "Romance in the Workplace/ Sexual Harassment: When Does One Become the Other?" is available from the Merchants and Manufacturers Association in Los Angeles, California (213/748-0421).

## Viva La Difference!

Romances often begin with physical attraction. But did you know that attractiveness is also a factor in executive success? Or that attractiveness is heightened when men are more "manly" and women are more "womanly"?

Research by the National Institute of Business Management shows that attractiveness helps men and women equally in the workplace. And it works man-to-man as well as woman-to-woman.

Men like "manly" men more when women are around to provide a contrast, says the institute. And women are more drawn toward women who act "womanly."

It doesn't have anything to do with stereotypes, such as men being expected to act more assertive, the institute claims. It's a question of

how the members of each gender assert themselves—whether in "manly" or "womanly" manners.

NIBM, which is located in New York City, offers a book, *Relationships in Your Office: The Attraction Factor in Executive Success*, that explains further.

The book also addresses such issues as how to tell who's attracted to whom and how that affects company politics, how to tell the difference between couples who are just friends and those who are more than just friends, and how to keep your mind on your work despite friendly distractions.

## Famous Office Romances

Judging from responses to "Voice Mail" on the office-romance question, people have met in the office, had romances, and even gotten married, and their personal and working relationships have survived.

But some better-known couples haven't fared as well. Perhaps that's why they're famous. Either their relationships began in the office, or the couples formed business partnerships as well as romantic ones.

- Mary Cunningham and William Bendix
- Leona and Harry Helmsley
- Della Street and Perry Mason (unrequited)
- Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas (acquitted)
- Sonny and Cher
- Lucy and Desi
- Bugsy Siegel and Virginia Hill
- Bonnie and Clyde
- Anthony and Cleopatra.

*And, hey, let's be careful out there.*

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