

The Business Brain

Love may be the drug, but work is no longer place to score

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SUSAN PINKER

As women started working long hours and were hitting their professional stride in the 1980s, the workplace became a “natural theatre” for sexual interaction, wrote sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild in *The Time Bind*. She noted that meetings at hotels and restaurants became the “fantasy settings” for romantic encounters between co-workers.

Well, those days are over, according to a new U.S. survey of 5,200 single people. Consider these new signs of self-restraint: Only a third of single workers surveyed said they would be willing to date someone they met on the job. And only 12 per cent said they actually do date a colleague – with about half of that small group saying they keep their relationships under wraps. Being hush-hush can be seen as judicious or as putting additional strain on a couple; most workplace romances last less than three months.

Despite the possible complications, the majority of those who met their partner at work said their relationship had no impact on their work.

“Office romances are few, short and not usually destructive,” said Helen Fisher, a biological anthropologist at Rutgers University who designed and analyzed the study, along with Evergreen College social historian Stephanie Coontz, and evolutionary biologist Justin Garcia, from Binghamton University.

The survey – which covered people from 21 to 65 and which Dr. Fisher said is the largest national sounding of its kind – was financed by online dating service Match.com and executed by an online research company, MarketTools. The results portray contemporary singles as remarkably conservative when it comes to mixing love with livelihood.

One reason may be that employees – especially those just starting out – may be less willing to take risks with their careers in this economy. In fact, there has been a downward trend of workplace romances over the past two decades according to a series of U.S. surveys. In 1985 almost 75 per cent of the work force reported that they had been involved in a romantic relationship that started at work, but by 1995 that figure had dropped to 50 per cent and by 2002, it was 33 per cent, according to surveys by the U.S. Bureau of National Affairs, the American Management Association, and the Society for Human Resource Management.

Dr. Fisher noted one intriguing result from the new survey she analyzed: Only 6 per cent of single women said they had ever dated their boss. “For so many generations, a woman’s only career path was to marry well and to marry up. Those days have changed,” she said, adding that modern women are now willing to go out with a man who makes the same salary.

And the boss is no longer using his or her influence to win a mate, she said.

Well, at least not overtly. The chill on workplace romances may have something to do with the threat of accusations of sexual harassment. Consensual relationships can be misconstrued by other employees as an abuse of power or influence, one reason why they’re frowned upon in many corporate environments.

Plus, people now have many other opportunities to meet potential partners aside from the workplace, most notably via the Internet. Citing another survey of more than 11,000 married people, Dr. Fisher said: “One out of six marriages made in the past three years were between people who met online – more than twice the number who met in bars, clubs or other social events and many more times than through church or place of worship.”

There may be another reason why people may try to avoid romance at work: They anticipate the visceral pain of rejection. An earlier study led by Dr. Fisher, published last July in the *Journal of Neurophysiology*, found that the brains of those who have been rejected in love show the same pattern of activation as addicts craving a fix, or people in acute physical distress. A challenge under the best of circumstances, a romantic breakup or rebuff may feel unbearable when the object of your affections attends the same meetings.

“It’s exactly the same brain circuitry that is linked to profound addiction, such as with cocaine,” Dr. Fisher said of romantic love. “It’s basically the same reward system in the brain.”

It’s not that surprising then, that singles would look for rewards – at least the romantic kind – in “fantasy settings” not associated with work.

Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap..

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