

## When Cupid Makes Office Visits

by Emily Sopensky

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In June 2001. Two days after Jessica Wyde -- a freshly minted MBA from The University of Texas at Austin -- started work at United Way Capital Area in Austin, she met the man that she is now with. "[Dating a fellow worker] is not a practice that is encouraged there, but we couldn't help it," she says. "We fell madly in love."

Andy Quaglino, a senior software engineer at Pervasive Software [Nasdaq:PVSW], met his wife Debi in social gatherings across the street at BB Rovers, a local hangout for employees of companies near the intersection of Research Blvd. and Oak Knoll. Debi works for Pervasive's quality assurance group.

Susy Brill was employed by a marketing group at Texas Instruments Incorporated [NYSE: TXN] in Austin when she moved into a new product group based in Amelo, The Netherlands. Already separated from her husband of eight years, she met the group's head design engineer in late 1990. And that was that. Their engagement party took place in Austin. By the spring of the following year, TI had moved her to Holland. She married Loek d'Hont two months later.

Lara and Steve met while working for a 10-member marketing group at an Austin-based large computer manufacturer. After six months of working side by side, they went to happy hour together. They married three years later.

Love happens -- especially in the workplace. Whether love is a by-product of a chemical reaction or an emotion grounded in respect, admiration, and friendship, you're more likely to find it in the workplace than not.

Careerbuilder.com, a website devoted to supporting career development, surveyed its readership about office romances. Of the 3,517 respondents, 65 percent had been involved in at least one office romance. According to the American Management Association, 80 percent of the workforce has admitted to such an indulgence.

"Statistics show that about one-third of employees meet their future spouse in the workplace," says Lacey Gourley, a partner with Bracewell & Patterson, LLP's Austin Office. She specializes in employment law.

Considering that many of us spend our best waking hours at a workplace where the genders are mixed, it is hardly a surprise that a Alexandria, Virginia-based Society of Human Resource Management survey found that 55 percent of HR professionals said that marriage is the most likely outcome of office romances.

"If you're dedicated to your career, where else are you going to meet people?" Susy d'Hont asks.

Yet the same study of 617 professionals reported that 72 percent have no written policy. Fourteen percent have an unwritten policy compared with 13 percent who have one in writing. Careerbuilder.com reports only 10 percent with a written policy.

While most couples don't snuggle in the corner of the lunchroom each day, dating someone you work with can raise red flags with co-workers. In the same SHRM study, HR professionals reported that the outcomes of such activities include complaints of favoritism, claims of sexual harassment, and decreased productivity.

"TI was supportive. They moved me to Europe so that we could get married," d'Hont says. "There was no policy against it. But it didn't hurt that my unit was European-based. My boss, who lived in the U.K., was quite cosmopolitan and had lived all over the world."

For 10 years now, the d'Honts continue to work side by side even though they left TI Dallas this year to join a startup in Maryland. They went as a packaged deal.

Susy d'Hont about her and her husband's workplace relation: "Our strengths complement one another. It's good for the organization."

Mark McDermott, head of semiconductor giant Intel Corporation's Austin office, has a similar view of workplace relationships. In a recent event, he promoted working for a digital chip firm like the Santa Clara,

California-based Intel. In his rationale – in fact, the last bullet on his last slide -- working in 300-member design teams is a good place to meet a future spouse.

“[Chip designers] spend long hours together and are of like mind,” McDermott says.

“Having worked with my husband I got to see his actual character, work ethic and integrity,” Laura relates. “I liked him as a person before we actually dated.”

A Fortune magazine survey of CEOs found that 63 percent did not believe office romances impacted productivity.

But cohabiting colleagues can make the workplace uncomfortable for others and may even affect the bottom line.

“A client of mine, the CEO of a local company, hired his girlfriend to work under his partner,” says Hayden Hayden, a certified corporate coach and co-founder of Austin-based Choice Coaching. “She is supposed to make 10 calls per day, but the company is lucky if she does three.”

The office romance in this case compromises the couple’s relationship, the two company official’s relationship, and the company’s profits.

Whether written or unwritten, one of the inviolate rules that HR professionals and most couples abide by is to avoid nepotism. Being supervised by a lover can cause great emotional stress to the couple and the whole company.

Experts contend that the minimum HR policy, written or unwritten, should also ban a supervisor having authority over someone with whom he or she lives or shares living quarters, regardless of the type of personal relationship.

“I have a mid-sized employer in Austin,” says Gourley. “Two of its employees were involved for about six years. ... The man was the woman's direct supervisor. She broke off the relationship. The two subsequently went on a business trip together. ... A fight occurred, the police were called and charges filed.

“This situation has created moral issues and stress throughout the office,” Gourley notes. “This is a typical situation of when office romance goes sour.” The company did not have a nepotism policy or policy prohibiting dating.

Finally, an employee with access to confidential or sensitive information concerning an employee with whom he or she has a consensual romantic or sexual relationship is also a situation that can be risky to the company and the employees.

Laura and Steve found jobs at other companies in Austin but their bond is secure. Andy says he rarely sees Debi at work, but it does make it easier for them to organize transportation for her children’s afterschool activities.

All took pains to keep the relationship private and discreet.

While most colleagues will know or suspect a relationship almost before it happens, burdening colleagues with unasked for details of an office romance is unnecessary.

“We kept it a secret for a full two weeks,” Wyde says.

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