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Contact me with any questions or to discuss how we can assist your organization.

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Mitigating the Risks of Workplace Romances

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Positive relationships between employees are important to foster a pleasant workplace environment and studies show this results in improved employee engagement and retention. Employers commonly provide opportunities for employees to create professional bonds between workers; parties, happy hours, mixers, etc., may have the unintended consequence of facilitating workplace romance. Pop culture often depicts office romances in a comical light; however, this is no laughing matter for employers. Workplace romances come with risks to employers: bad behavior, poor performance, claims of harassment or discrimination.

Mitigate the risks of employees' romantic dalliances by taking pro-active steps like these:

- **Policies:** An employer's best first defensive step is to draft and enforce policies that clearly state harassment is not tolerated, and to provide clear guidance to employees to report their concerns. Additional policies may include prohibiting relationships between supervisors and those they supervise, or anyone in a position of power over another where there may be a conflict of interest. Employers may also adopt policies that prohibit amorous relationships between any employees; this however, is fraught with difficulties and will likely drive such activity "underground" which is harder for employers to manage and can actually lead to worse consequences. Consult with Employers Council on policy development.
- **Atmosphere:** Maintain a workplace atmosphere of respect and professionalism. Despite the harmless intent behind them, certain activities and gestures can get out of hand and be misinterpreted: hugs, kissing, love notes, hand holding, certain emojis/ gifs. Being "laid back" and "easy going" is no defense if an employee claims harassment due to an atmosphere that tolerates unwanted physical contact and related behaviors. Plan events carefully to avoid an "anything goes" spirit; monitor alcohol consumption.
- **Awareness:** Supervisors/ managers and HR must be aware of observable activity and behaviors of employees in the workplace. If something does not seem right, investigate.
- **Communication:** Annually, remind employees about anti-harassment and related policies. This reminds them of the expectations and enforces their role in maintaining a professional workplace environment.
- **Training:** All employees should be trained on workplace behaviors and policies; annual refreshers are especially important for managers and supervisors who have a higher responsibility to model respectful workplace relationships and identify and address inappropriate behaviors.
- **Love Contract:** Employers may wish to consider the use of Love Contracts between employees who are romantically involved. There are many potential pitfalls to this approach, so consult legal counsel to discuss the pros and cons of this option.

Fifty-two percent of Americans report having romantic relationships at work (currently or in the past), and many keep it a secret. Every workplace faces risks if pre-emptive actions are not taken. Balancing employee's love lives with business needs is a challenge: clamping down too hard undermines a workplace culture of trusting relationships; leniency invites problematic behaviors and legal challenges. To figure out the right mix, contact Employers Council for help.