



HR

SPOTLIGHT

QUARTERLY TIPS, TOOLS, AND TECHNIQUES FOR
HUMAN RESOURCE PROFESSIONALS

FALL 1999

Cupid in the Cubicles: The Perils of Workplace Romance

*I*t's not just *Ally McBeal* in TV-land, or *Bill and Monica* in DC-land; romance at work is alive and well in workplaces across the country. And it should come as no surprise given the way we work today. Americans are spending more time at work — according to the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the average workweek for both blue- and white-collar workers exceeds 50 hours per week (not counting the commute); and less time at play — a recent Gallup Poll survey suggests we spend less than 16 hours a week in recreation or other leisure activities.

What does this mean for you, the employer? In a word — headaches. An office romance can disrupt the workplace and create a myriad of problems for employers, of both the legal and non-legal variety. This issue of **HR Spotlight** will examine the dilemma employers face when Cupid strikes at work and provide some practical suggestions for attacking the problem before it attacks you.

What's the Big Deal?

Romance at work is certainly nothing new; nor are many of the problems that often go along with it. But a number of factors have exacerbated those problems in recent years:

- ◆ Employees are spending an increasing number of hours at work. (See “S/he Works Hard for the Money” on page 2.)
- ◆ The demographics of the workforce have changed considerably — due primarily to the large influx of women into the workplace over the last two decades. According to BLS data, of the approximately 135 million Americans in the workforce, women now represent nearly half (46 percent).
- ◆ The “team” concept of working that has become quite popular in the last decade or so tends to foster closeness and familiarity between co-workers.
- ◆ Those who work closely together in the workplace often have a lot in common with each other — they may have the same job pressures, be working on similar projects, and have similar educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. And they have a lot of time to get to know one another — whether it be from carpooling, joint work projects, traveling together on business trips, going to company social outings, or simply chatting on the elevator or at the fax machine.
- ◆ More people are waiting until they're older to get married.
- ◆ A steady flow of state and federal laws that regulate workplace conduct — accompanied by an increasingly litigious workforce — have made it more important than ever for employers to be proactive in preventing problems before they occur.

When you put all of those factors together, it often spells trouble for employers.