

Ramifications of office romance are dire

The man I interviewed for the CEO position of a medium sized organization was well spoken, had the right skills and experience and presented himself very professionally. Still there was something nagging at me...when I asked about why he had left his former role, he was vague, citing a "mutual decision" as the reason. (Trust me, it's rarely mutual - who called the meeting?) I came back to it three times and finally he confessed that he had been romantically involved with one of his female managers. Even though she had left the organization shortly afterwards, he had been fired by the Board a few weeks later. As wonderful a candidate as he seemed to be, we didn't hire him. A CEO that would put the company in harm's way for claims of sexual harassment, favouritism, reputation damage or more, because he can't keep himself on a short leash, is not worth the risk.

This is not an isolated case. Office affairs are much more common than you might think. According to one source, there are 10 million of them going on in the U.S. at any given time. These trysts can be delightfully delicious at the beginning and ridiculously troublesome when they end - and they almost always end, one way or the other. The legacy of the office affair is rarely good. Having to continue to see the person you've dumped, or been dumped by, can be uncomfortable and even painful. If either of the individuals was married their reputation can be negatively affected. From the employer's standpoint, there is an impact on

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HUMAN CAPITAL



productivity, and there can be damage to the company's reputation if one or both of the individuals was a high ranking employee. Who can forget Harry Stonecipher, former CEO of Boeing, who was asked to resign after having an affair with a female executive?

Office romances are common because co-workers spend a lot of time together and often become quite close. Sometimes employers even unwittingly thrust

co-workers into situations that fuel temptations, such as out of town business trips, events where alcohol consumption is encouraged or late night work to meet deadlines. Throw in a high rate of unhappy marriages and today's preoccupation with the pursuit of mind-blowing sex (not that there's anything wrong with that), and you have yourself the perfect storm.

The funny part of office dalliances is that the participants almost always think no one knows. But they leave unconscious clues. They stand too close. They make eye contact for too long. They talk about each other too much. They eat lunch together too often. And there is an almost palpable chemistry between the two that everyone in the room can feel.

Faced with the knowledge that two individuals in your organization are engaged in a romance, you would be wise to think through your response, if any, very carefully. On the one hand, we are now very sensitized to privacy issues - and what people do on their own time, and off company premises, is private. On the other hand, with today's emphasis on the ethical and social accountability of managers, particularly those in publicly funded or publicly traded organizations, there is a potential risk of damage and liability. Balancing these two seemingly opposing imperatives will require knowledge, skill, sensitivity and probably a little advice from an HR professional or even an employment lawyer. Sometimes the right thing to do is absolutely nothing. Other

times a discreet chat with each of the partners will do the trick. In extreme cases, like Mr. Stonecipher's and my CEO candidate above, it's better to ask the person to resign in order to mitigate the damages to the company.

Two unmarried, junior level employees, neither of whom reports to the other, conducting a romance with the utmost discretion probably do not represent much of a risk to the company. Anything above that and things can get messy. At best, when the romance ends, you have two people that are uncomfortable around each other for a few weeks and some time wasted on gossiping at the water cooler. At worst, you have a claim of sexual harassment, wrongful dismissal, or both, and a sullied company reputation to clean up.

If they are so fraught with danger why do people continue to carry on office affairs? Perhaps the answer lies in the question...the danger could be the very thing that draws people in. Or are we a bunch of hedonists lacking in self discipline? In any case, this topic could make an interesting discussion at your next risk management meeting.

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Law Summit can mitigate business risk in today's soft economy

The theme of the third annual Business Law Summit will be "Economic Uncertainties: Prepare, Prevent & Protect - Mitigating the Risks and Discovering the Opportunities." This is the only business law summit in western GTA.

This year's summit will be held on Thursday, September 25, 2008 from 7:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. at the Mississauga Grand, 35 Brunel Road.

Given the current Canadian economy with a high dollar, fluctuating stock markets, the auto sector in serious trouble, high commodity

prices, and rising food prices, this year's Summit will kick off with a panel discussion titled "Leaning Into the Headwinds."

The panel, moderated by Rick Drennan, editor of The Mississauga Business Times, will be comprised of economists and bankers including: Scotia McLeod's legendary Fred Ketchen, TD's Pascal Gauthier, and HSBC's Stewart Hall. RBC has also agreed to participate.

After the panel discussion, about 10 lawyers from Mississauga and Brampton law firms will

address legal topics to help business people mitigate risks and discover the opportunities of today's changing economy. Areas covered include corporate, leasing, family, technology, criminal, tax, labour and employment, and insolvency and bankruptcy law.

"The law changes regularly and it is important to know your rights as well as your obligations. In today's fast-paced business environment, keeping abreast of legal developments is vital because they have an impact on the business decisions our clients

make every day and often represent opportunities" says Pallett Valo LLP Managing Partner Anna Esposito.

"The 2008 Business Law Summit is a unique opportunity to get updated on current legal issues as they impact business and individuals, in just one half-day. For business executives and owner-managers in the Western GTA, that's time well spent," adds Esposito. The 2007 Business Law Summit was attended by about 100 business people from across Peel.

Contributing sponsors of the 2008 Business Law Summit include: Scotiabank, Connon & Iacobelli, DeRusha Law Firm, RBC, TD Bank Financial Group, HSBC, and lead sponsor Pallett Valo LLP, Mississauga's largest law firm. Rogers Television and the Mississauga Business Times are the media sponsors.

The cost to attend the 2008 Business Law Summit has been set at \$75 (plus GST) per participant to cover the conference room rental, breakfast, lunch, and coffee breaks. Space is limited, so register early. For more information, or to register for the 2008 Business Law Summit, click on: www.w.w.businesslawsummit.com.



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