

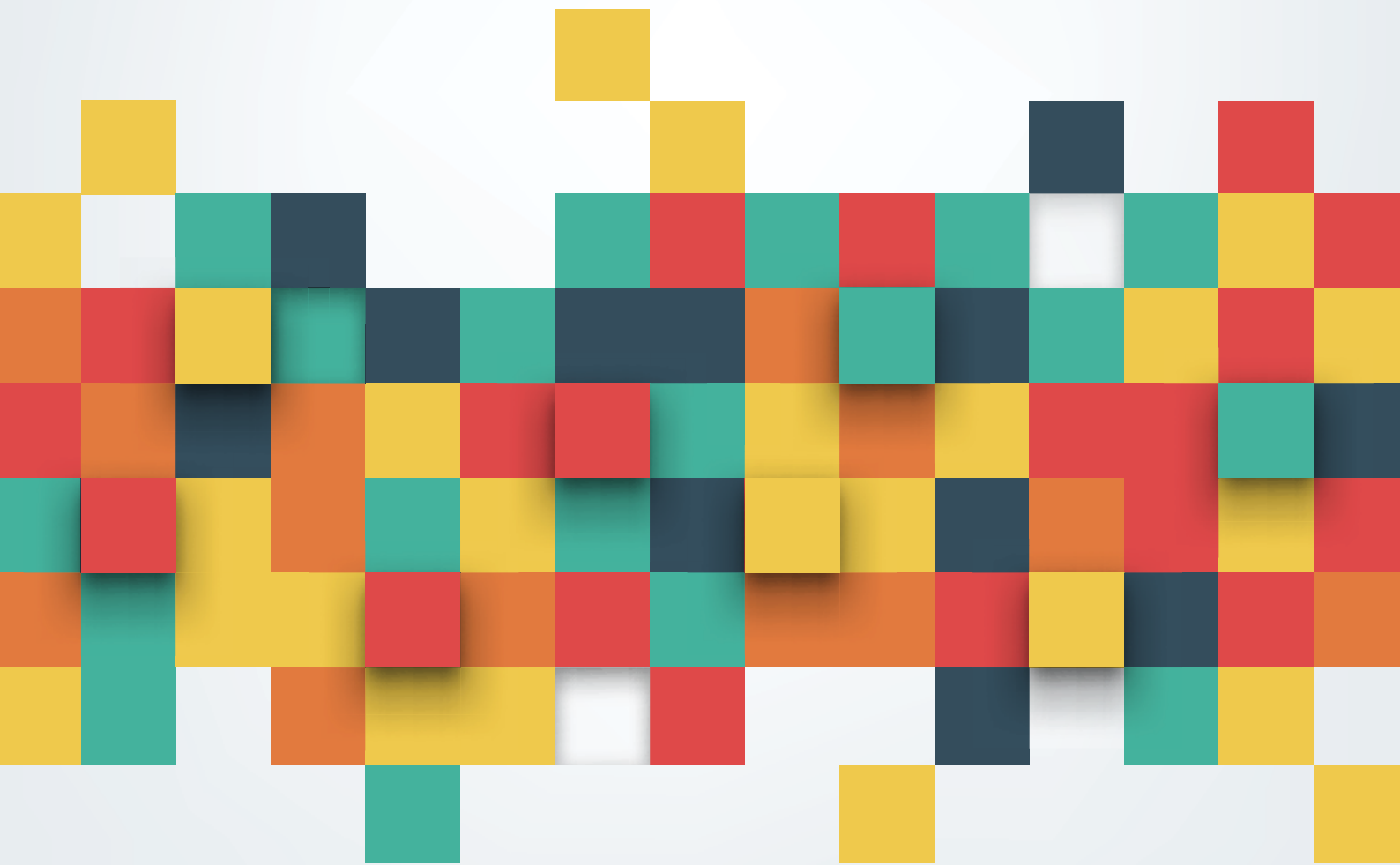
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DID YOU KNOW?

WORKPLACE ROMANCE



COLIBRILAW



In the film “Office Romance” by the legendary Russian director and screenwriter Eldar Ryazanov, the main characters live happily ever after following a workplace romance. However, workplace romances, defined as “mutually desired relationships involving sexual attraction between two employees of the same organization”¹, can lead to far less positive consequences. Common negative outcomes include the termination of an employee’s employment contract, legal problems or negative media publicity.

The public tends to remember cases in which high profile individuals lose their jobs. The most talked about example in recent history is probably the 1998 Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, which led to the impeachment of the then US president. More recently, top managers of organisations such as the World Bank, Red Cross, CIA and Boeing stepped down after their workplace romances were uncovered.

Important questions for management include whether or not workplace romances should be banned, and if managers should interfere when romances do occur. This is not an easy question to answer and there are two opposing views in management literature.

One school believes that romantic relationships should be treated as private affairs, external to the organisation and its business. Some scholars even argue that sexuality should be encouraged at work to foster productivity². Allowing workplace romance and attraction can make organisations more passionate and exciting places³, where relationships between work colleagues are re-energised and more productive⁴.

Conversely, the other school of thought argues that managers should intervene where romantic relationships are detected because such relationships can be marred by favouritism, discrimination and even sexual harassment, none of which should be welcome in modern corporations.

Literature on the topic seems to distinguish between two categories of workplace romance: lateral (a relationship between employees of equal status) and hierarchical (a relationship between employees of different levels in the hierarchy, e.g. a manager and a subordinate)⁵. Hierarchical romances are more likely to require the management’s intervention as they are both more frequent and more problematic than lateral romances⁶. Importantly, two essential factors must be considered early on when tackling this issue: whether both parties are ‘single’ (implications for infamy or infidelity), and whether it is consensual (to prevent harassment).



So, the issue of workplace romance is not as easy as it may seem, and there is a conflicting combination of potential risks and corporate benefits. However, the issue is more prevalent and therefore more significant than you might think: more than 70% of employees in the UK and around 40% of employees in the US have experienced a workplace romance, and research suggests that almost a quarter of managers have been involved in a workplace romance at least once during their career. So beware, managers, workplace romance is everywhere!

¹ Pierce and Aguinis (2001, p. 206)

² Marcuse (1968)

³ Brewis and Linstead (2000), Burrell (1992)

⁴ Benz and Frey (2004)

⁵ Burrell (1992), Pringle (1989), Gallop (1997)

⁶ Karl and Sutton (2000), Pierce and Aguinis (1997)

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