

## Romance in the Workplace: Should You Fall in Love at Work?

**Description:** Because we spend so much time at work, it is not surprising that we meet romantic partners, and sometimes future spouses, at the office. MRA's Maureen Siwula, HR Advisor, is here to clear up your curiosity and be transparent on everything romantic in the workplace.

### Key Takeaways:

- In the top 5 places where you meet your significant other: Work!
- Every organization, no matter what their purpose is, should have a conflict of interest or business ethics or a relationship policy with guidelines.
- Tip for employers: Teach, mentor, guide by example, and have solid, clear policies and education for your employees. Don't make assumptions that they know and understand.
- Tip for employees: Keep yourself very professional, and keep yourself engaged in the work. And if you do meet somebody, do it the right way according to the policies and procedures

### Transcript:

*Transcripts are computer generated -- not 100% accurate word-for-word.*

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Intro

Hello hello, everybody, and welcome to 30 minute THRIVE, your go-to podcast for anything and everything HR, powered by MRA - The Management Association. Looking to stay on top of the ever-changing world of HR? MRA has got you covered. We'll be the first to tell you what's hot and what's not. I'm your host, Sophie Boler, and we are so glad you're here. Now it's time to THRIVE.

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Sophie Boler

Hello everybody. Thanks for taking the time to spend part of your day with us here today. I'm excited to introduce our guests and our topic for today. And it's February, the month of love, so you know what that means. We're going to be talking about romance in the workplace with

Maureen's Siwula. She's our HR

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Sophie Boler

advisor here at MRA. But part of her role is working on our 27/7 HR Hotline. So Maureen has over 40 years of HR experience and has worked in both nonprofit and profit positions in health care, education, service, philanthropy, and manufacturing. So she comes with a ton of HR knowledge and hopefully some workplace romance knowledge too. So I'm excited to talk to you today, Maureen.

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Sophie Boler

We can dive into the first question.

Maureen Siwula

Sure, Sophie.

Sophie Boler

So I've heard that work is quite a popular place to find your significant other. Is this true? I'm curious what you're hearing.

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Maureen Siwula

That's not only what I hear and see in the workplace, Sophie, but it's also researched. If you institute a study of ways people meet each other, the most popular ways that people see their partners, and in the top five is the workplace. So it's something that's kept me pretty busy in my career is dealing with workplace relationships.

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Sophie Boler

Absolutely. So I guess I'm curious to know what are some of the challenges of a romantic relationship in the workplace?

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Maureen Siwula

The challenges are many. The romance is not the challenge because who doesn't love a romance story, right? As long as everything works out well. It's when things go awry, when things get troublesome, when people don't follow policies or rules, or you hear it through the grapevine or rumor mill, or you see something that's inappropriate—that's where things get very challenging.

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Maureen Siwula

And employers and coworkers can become rather involved in situations that they really don't need to be involved in.

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Sophie Boler

Just going off of what you just said there, should every business have a policy on workplace romance, or can you really not make any strict rules and relationships?

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Maureen Siwula

Based on the kind of company you are, you can have strict or less strict rules, but I do think every business, every organization, no matter what your purpose is, should have a conflict of interest or a business ethics or a relationship policy with guidelines. You don't have to be as strict as absolutely no dating whatsoever because that might be just really very limiting for people and you might lose people because of that, but you should have parameters around the how to's and the why to's

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Maureen Siwula

so there isn't a perception of a conflict. You can understand in the supervisor/employee relationship, if somebody has more power over you in a role and it begins to become a relationship that might look like favoritism or it might be perceived as harassment. So this is where it gets challenging.

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Sophie Boler

Absolutely. And just talking about your personal experience, have you ever had to deal with a workplace romance as a manager in your career or heard any calls on the hotline?

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Maureen Siwula

Well, absolutely. Why do we call it the “hotline”? Because we get a lot of information that is from employers that they’re dealing with that very challenging. Absolutely. In my 40 years, I’ve seen everything from things go into sexual harassment, discrimination and seeing people happily ever after marry in the workplace. And we like that last story.

Sophie Boler

Oh, absolutely.

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Maureen Siwula

But when employers call us, or when I’ve been a leader in an organization or challenged, it generally is because somebody is not telling the truth, not being transparent, not following the policy. Example would be—and this really did happen—is the coworkers of an employee started a rumor rising that, I’ll call her “Sally,” was dating “Bob,” and they saw them in the tavern after work and then they saw them at work in the car and people were talking and gossiping.

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Maureen Siwula

And there was a policy about conflicts of interests. And Bob was Sally’s supervisor, so there definitely was a conflict. Then all of a sudden, Sally’s getting the preferred shifts and she’s getting the preferred projects. So what would have been best in that situation is for Bob or Sally to work within management or the human resource department, follow the policy which says you need to disclose any conflicts of interest.

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Maureen Siwula

And what should have happened in that case is that if they truly wanted to have this relationship that was healthy and good, Sally would have been transferred to a different department.

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Sophie Boler

For sure. And kind of going along with that, let's say you do have two employees who just began a romantic relationship at work. What are their next steps, or do they go right to HR and tell them? Do they tell their teams about it? What's your advice?

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Maureen Siwula

Well, my advice is one thing. The practicality of what's really happens sometimes is another. But the best thing to do always is think with intention about this relationship before you engage in it, if you can. You have a job first. You took this job first; meeting somebody at work came second. What's the most important thing is for you to continue your job in a healthy way.

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Maureen Siwula

So understand the policies, understand the rules, and be in this relationship in an honest way to say we can't go any further with this because the policy says that we have to disclose this to HR. So we need to do that. I can do it alone. You can do it alone. But that's, really need to do that if we're going to be visible with our relationship, and then see what advice is given to you.

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Maureen Siwula

If it's a consensual, healthy relationship, it doesn't conflict with anything in the business ethics, you're you're good to go ahead. But if there is a conflict, that power struggle once again, harassment or discrimination, or let's say you meet a vendor that comes in and replaces cartridges in the printer or something and you, this is another person. Well, that's also a conflict because the business has a relationship with that vendor for money and you don't want to perceive as being involved in that situation.

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Maureen Siwula

So it's not just your coworker that this stuff can happen, but it can be people who enter into the business.

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Sophie Boler

So would you recommend that couple telling their team?

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Maureen Siwula

No. I have, recommend they tell HR or their manager first. Keep it at a high level and I would keep it relatively professional and private until you do get some advisement. Now, if your company doesn't have a policy, let's say you're pretty small, right? Think about the consequences. Make a policy for yourself. Do you want to be seen as a professional individual contributing to work, or do you want to be seen as that person who dates at work?

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Maureen Siwula

You want to be seen as a professional. And so even in the absence of policy, check yourself. You know, be sure that you want this relationship, but you also want to keep your job and be very healthy and professional about it.

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Sophie Boler

Absolutely. So some research that I've seen have shown that office romances are actually frowned upon. So what really should HR be cautious of when one partner's in a higher position at the company, kind of like you mentioned—Sally and Bob.

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Maureen Siwula

Right. Right. Yeah, some companies do frown upon it and maybe even have a zero-fraternization policy that says there's no dating in the workplace here. And that could be in a situation that is a very confidential product line or something. And employers have the right to make strict policies if it makes sense. You know, you want to be sensible about these things. But most of them have parameters and not the strict policy.

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Maureen Siwula

There are some companies that absolutely, they're too small and they just can't tolerate what comes as a result of the drama of the workplace relationship. But the parameters are a better way to go.



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Sophie Boler

And are there concerns on work performance when two people are in a relationship at work?

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Maureen Siwula

Absolutely. If you get too distracted and you're not contributing and not being that professional contributing individual, maybe you're starting to show some public display of affection. Maybe, you know, there's more times than not. And that's a disciplinary measure whether it's a good relationship or a bad relationship. If you're spending too much time on break with one person, you need to be coached and counseled and redirected.

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Maureen Siwula

But check yourself—what are you doing to make yourself look good for your employer?

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Sophie Boler

So how things really change in the workplace when it comes to workplace romance? How has it all evolved?

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Maureen Siwula

It has evolved immensely, like many things in the workplace have, you know. Sophie, when I started working, I didn't really even have a computer, so and now I have, you know, many of them. So evolution in the workplace is everywhere, particularly on relationships and professionalism. The laws that have evolved around sexual harassment and the education we have had since the #MeToo movement and other things, discrimination makes us much more cautious and careful about how it is that we treat our workplace and our employees.

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Maureen Siwula

So it starts with an employer. When you hire someone, you need to teach them the rules of the road and you need to set examples. So years and years ago there weren't a lot of policies and procedures in place. And I don't love the policy up for sake of policy, but we all need rules, don't we? We all need some parameters and education, and it starts with the education at orientation.

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Maureen Siwula

What kind of workplace culture are we? Okay, so I have read—I think it's true—that at Google and Facebook they have a rule about dating. If you ask a person out once and they say, no, you can't ask them again. So that's very strict, right? But that's what their rule is. Others just put it in the conflict of interest.

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Maureen Siwula

Relationships need to be free of conflict, and then give some examples such as dating a supervisor, having illicit, not illegal but illicit affair, you know, having a unhealthy relationship. So the policies have evolved to support an employer, to teach their employees and hold them

accountable to good behavior. So it's through policy development, education, and accountability. So employers need not to be afraid or scared to call somebody into the office to coach them if things are not looking good or feeling good.

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Maureen Siwula

I don't know about you, Sophie, but if somebody was rumorizing about me that I was dating somebody at work and I truly was not, I would like to know that people are talking about that.

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Sophie Boler

I would too.

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Maureen Siwula

Yep. Exactly. And so when we say things that are not true, it hurts people very much so. And so see something, say something is what kind of our culture has become in the workplace, as well as in life.

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Sophie Boler

So going along with that, you would recommend that an employer should be completely transparent on their workplace relationship policies right at the start?

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Maureen Siwula

Right at the start. Just like when you get the handbook, and it says something like, you know, you can't sleep on the job or you can't steal from your employer, you can't have an unprofessional, conflicted relationship within the workplace. Makes sense to me. I came here for a job, I didn't come here for a spouse or partner, but that could be a bonus.

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Maureen Siwula

Absolutely. If I'm doing it according to the rules.

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Sophie Boler

So should that. should the couple have a plan in case it doesn't work out? Or what happens when it doesn't work out?

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Maureen Siwula

Well, usually they don't have a plan if it doesn't work out. People want their relationships to work. But again, check yourself, be professional. What is going to happen if we don't tell somebody? What is going to happen if all of a sudden we're fighting at work and before we were dating? Plan B is always, always good to have, right?

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Maureen Siwula

Plan A is it all works out, but Plan B, it all works out and we still can work together and be decent to each other. So yes, having a backup plan is the same as when your computer crashes. You want to have a backup for that as well. So if this romance crashes, we can survive it, right? Because we're professional contributing employees.

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Maureen Siwula

We can get through this. However, sometimes intervention needs to occur, and I've had interesting calls on the hotline once again about when a relationship goes bad. Example: factory, two coworkers that relationship not power driven, perfectly somewhat healthy right and they're dating and it's going along fine, it's not bothering anybody at work. Well, Monday they come into work and apparently they had a terrible weekend.

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Maureen Siwula

They got into a disagreement over the weekend and it continued in the workplace on Monday morning. They punched in next to each other. And before you know it, I'm getting a phone call on the hotline because he took his lunch box and hit her up inside the head. So that's when it could get really bad.

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Sophie Boler

Yeah, well, you mentioned healthy relationships at workplace, and that didn't seem too healthy.

Maureen Siwula

It wasn't.

Sophie Boler

What about when it's not a healthy relationship, and when there may be affairs in the workplace that are seen or talked about—do you have anything to comment on that?

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Maureen Siwula

Yes, unfortunately, those are really difficult, sensitive issues. And sometimes it starts with a shoulder to lean on with a coworker or your assistant. And maybe you're talking about your marital difficulties and all of a sudden you're in a relationship with this person. Those are not good situations for anyone. And so, once again, if it's being brought forward not by you or the other employee, we're going to get into the rumor mill and we're going to have unnecessary drama, and so in that situation, it's the manager's job and the leader's job to talk to those people about this cannot happen in the workplace.

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Maureen Siwula

And many times I would refer the employee assistance program, which is a benefit that most employers have. If they don't I strongly encourage it because they can seek counsel or help for the situation. The person who is having marital difficulties should be seeking a doctor's advice or a therapist's advice, not your coworker. It's just not the right place or time for those things.

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Maureen Siwula

So lots of coaching. Compassion is really important in those situations, but firmness too. I mean, if people don't want to listen to you and don't want to stop, the next action is discipline and maybe even separation.

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Sophie Boler

Yeah, it's a tough topic, but it's real.

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Maureen Siwula

Very real.

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Sophie Boler

Yeah. So as we do wrap up today, do you have any last thoughts or pieces of advice you can share with our listeners?

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Maureen Siwula

Advice number one for the employees: Keep yourself very professional, keep yourself engaged in the work. And if you do meet somebody, do it the right way according to the policies and procedures. Don't cause drama for yourself or for your employer. It's not necessary. You can have romance in the workplace, but not always and not under all conditions.

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Maureen Siwula

And then for employers: Teach, mentor, guide by example, have solid, clear policies and education for your employees. Don't make assumptions that they know and understand. Don't make the assumption that every employee walks into your organization knowing your rules because your rules, look at Google. I would never think I'd have a rule like that in my workplace, but I understand and respect why they do that.

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Maureen Siwula

I wouldn't walk in there assuming that that's what the rule is. We have to know and understand what our employers expect of us. And always deal with people, you know, in a compassionate, understanding way and fair and reasonable. I think the days of top-down punitive management don't work, understanding people where they're at and getting them to a place that they need to be.

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Sophie Boler

Those are all great points. So I thank you for being on 30 minute THRIVE today and really sharing your knowledge, expertise, advice on romance in the workplace. Fun topic.



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Maureen Siwula

It was! Thank you, Sophie, I enjoyed it.

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Sophie Boler

But if you liked our chat or topic today, I encourage you to leave a comment or review. Share this episode and consider joining MRA if you aren't a member already. We have all of the resources available in the show notes below for you, including Maureen's email and LinkedIn profile. So if you'd like to chat with her today or connect with her, those are also available to you in the show notes.

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Sophie Boler

Otherwise, thank you so much for tuning in today and we will see you next week.

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Maureen Siwula

Thank you.



## EPISODE 23

# Romance in the Workplace: Should You Fall in Love at Work?

00:17:44:10 - 00:18:06:15

### Outro

And that wraps up our content for this episode. Be sure to reference the show notes, where you can sign up to connect for more podcast updates. Check out other MRA episodes on your favorite podcast platform. And as always, make sure to follow MRA's 30 minute THRIVE so you don't miss out. Thanks for tuning in and we'll see you next Wednesday to carry on the HR conversation."