

RELATIONSHIPS IN THE WORKPLACE

Introduction

In today's world, it's increasingly common for colleagues to develop relationships in the workplace. Whether it's a platonic friendship, romantic involvement, or a combination of the two, relationships among co-workers have the potential to have a significant impact on the work environment.

The dynamics of workplace relationships can be complex, and it's important to take precautions to ensure that all interactions remain professional. Establishing clear guidelines can help protect both employees and the organization from potential conflicts of interest or harassment.

In this article we look at the difficulties that can be caused by workplace relationships and the 8 key steps you can take to manage them.

The issues

When it comes to platonic relationships, it's important to remember that it's normal for colleagues to form friendships. However, it's essential to remain mindful of boundaries and ensure that interactions don't interfere with job performance. It's also important to be aware that a friendship between two employees may be perceived as favouritism by other members of the team.

Romantic relationships at work can be even more complicated. When the relationship is consensual, it's important to ensure that the couple is still able to interact professionally and that their interactions don't create conflicts of interest or give either person an unfair advantage when it comes to promotions or other opportunities. Employers may also be concerned that relationships between colleagues (particularly if one party is senior and the other junior) might lead to the inappropriate disclosure of confidential information.

The breakdown of relationships between colleagues who have had a close or intimate relationship may also cause employers issues, for example if there are allegations of harassment, discrimination or, more simply, that those involved can no longer work together.

It's also important to be aware that not all romantic relationships are consensual, and it's essential to take measures to protect all employees from sexual harassment or discrimination.

8 key steps

1. Rather than avoiding the subject, or waiting for problems to arise, meet with the employees concerned at an early stage. During that meeting make clear your concerns, the problems that might arise and discuss any practical solutions.
2. Ensure that employees understand your expectations regarding professional behaviour, and to make sure that any relationships that do form don't interfere with job performance or create an uncomfortable work environment for other members of the team.



3. Place limits on the employees' job roles – for example, if one of the parties is responsible for promotion, recruitment or overtime decisions, consider whether those decisions should be taken by someone else if a conflict of interest or an allegation of favouritism might arise.
4. Consider different line management reporting if, for example, a team leader is in a relationship with one of their direct reports.
5. Consider moving one or both employees in a relationship to a different team.
6. Review the terms of both employees' contracts of employment to ensure that any obligations in relation to confidentiality are sufficiently robust. If not, consider asking both employees to agree to additional confidentiality obligations.
7. Consider a requirement that employees declare any personal relationships within the workplace. You can't prevent employees from forming relationships but, equally, you can't address any issues that might arise unless you are aware that any such relationship exists.
8. Consider introducing a Relationships at Work Policy. Such a policy can help to:
 - a. reinforce the standards expected of those who form personal relationships in the workplace;
 - b. make clear the consequences for employees if those standards are not met;
 - c. set out the options (such as those outlined above) that might be considered for employees who form personal relationships; and
 - d. assist line managers understand how to manage employees who may be in a relationship.

It is important to ensure that any steps an employer takes to manage relationships in the workplace are not discriminatory on grounds of sex, age, race, religion, disability, marital status or sexual orientation. For example, moving a female member of staff to another department, to avoid her making contact with a male employee, risks an allegation of sex discrimination if the male employee is not also moved.

By setting clear guidelines and expectations, organisations can ensure that all workplace relationships remain professional and that everyone in the business is treated with respect. With the right policies in place, it's possible to create a positive work environment where all employees can thrive.

If you need any advice or assistance in relation to any of these issues, please contact us at simon.bond@bondlegal.co.uk or on 07905 710365.

