

# Romancing the boss

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*Guys, if you're going to have an office fling, forget the intern: Date above you*

Summer vacation season is over, which means it's time to get back to some serious work. When it comes to relationships, this is not so sexy. Unless, of course, you're involved in a workplace romance, in which case: back-to-work sex!

Workplace romances are common enough these days - a recent survey by careerbuilder.ca found that one in three people have had one. I'd wager though that most of those are between equals. Certainly the conspiracy involved in supply-room snog sessions among colleagues can be pretty hot, but they're only lukewarm in comparison to the workplace relationships that cross the power divide, which, because of the laws of taboo, are sexier and, more importantly, engender more stimulating gossip for the rest of us.

For guys, the stereotype is that we'll be using power to date below us. But today, the workplace is a front line of equal opportunity and I was theoretically thinking, as a man, that I'd rather have a steamy office affair with my boss than the intern. This is not because I make weekly visits to a dominatrix or have a penchant for being bossed around (though I'm happy for you if that's your thing). I'd just feel, I don't know, less like a jerk, no matter whether I had real feelings for her or not.

Jennifer Berdahl, an associate professor at the Rotman School of Management in Toronto, explained why I may feel this way. Men, she says, in addition to typically wielding the physical strength advantage, have a foothold on two other forms of power: formal power, the visible hierarchy at work; and informal power, the social status and influence in society-at-large that sets the norms of romantic relationships. "Overlay informal relationship power over the formal one and you get a double-whammy of power," Dr. Berdahl says of a man dating a female subordinate. "But overlay the informal power with a [work romance] where the female has the formal power and it equalizes the power relationship implicitly." She called it a more "peer-like" coupling.

I buy this explanation, and come to think of it, Dr. Berdahl's power equation gives rise to a good unit to measure the rate at which informal power is being balanced: that is, the same rate at which female bosses hooking up with their interns start feeling like jerks.

Helaine Olen, co-author of *Office Mate: The Employee Handbook for Finding - and Managing - Romance on the Job*, says I would have good reason for feeling knee-jerkingly guilty for dating a female subordinate. "Research has shown that people think much better of a man who is dating his boss than a woman who is dating hers. If a woman is dating her boss, she's obviously a slut who is trying to get ahead," she says, paraphrasing the common perception, "but the guy must really be in love. And that's been a pretty consistent finding."

A former colleague of mine hooked up with his boss. They were both about the same age and now, seven years later, they're married and have a kid. He tells me that the origin of their relationship has been a source of dinner-party humour. "When we first started dating, I was the butt of many a Bill Clinton cigar joke," he says. "I think she loves telling the story of seducing an intern because it plays off the stereotype of male conquests of their employees."

Although I can certainly conceive of a similar true love between a male boss and his female employee, the history of men sexually exploiting women in the workplace would, I imagine, lead one to take a more defensive approach when telling the story, involving fewer, if any, knee-slappers.

Kathryn Borel, a writer and producer at the CBC whose memoir, *Corked*, was recently released, has had a few workplace romances. The first was with a guy seven years older, when she was 21 and an intern. But more recently, she was seeing someone at a lower level than her, though he did not directly report to her. "It was the first time I'd ever dated someone younger than me, which did have an impact on me - one of titillation. I sort of got off on being higher up in the ranks than he was. Plus, his skin was so smooth and boyish."

Oh yes, the times are a changing. And if you are a dude who wants to be avant-garde and date a higher-up at your company, I collected some legal advice for you. James Heeney, an employment lawyer at Rubin Thomlinson in Toronto, handles a lot of sexual-harassment cases and first of all wanted to warn people off workplace romance: "The bottom line is, a lot of relationships don't work and most companies have policies against it. It poisons the workplace."

But, since it is not possible to be a human and not contemplate sleeping with at least a few of your co-workers, or your boss, Mr. Heeney recommends an appropriate pick-up angle. If you must make your interest known, he says, "don't comment on clothing or appearance. A better approach is to invite the person to do something outside the workplace." If she says no, or changes the subject to something you put in her, um, inbox, best to drop it. Repeated unwanted advances, he says, may be grounds for dismissal. So when it comes to coffee-station flirtation, it's definitely best to take the boss lady's direction.