

# The Individual in the Changing Working Life

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## 10 Romantic relationships at work: old issues, new challenges

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Sex and romance develop in offices because that's where the people are. Men and women ... are likely to get together in ways not mentioned in the corporate policy manual. (Horn and Horn, 1982: 83)

Over the past several decades, increasing numbers of individuals have been meeting their significant others at work. This means that in addition to professional relationships and social friendships in the workplace, romantic relationships are adding another dynamic into workplace interactions. Indeed, conditions in today's workplace are such that romantic relationships may well be inevitable. Given this, managers can take one of two approaches. The first and most frequent approach is to focus on preventing such relationships and their potentially negative consequences. However, a more recent development in the organizational literature provides a new perspective for how organizations view their employees; positive psychology and positive organizational behavior suggest that work experiences can promote mental health (Turner, Barling, and Zacharatos, 2002). Thus, the second approach changes the practitioner's primary focus from the costs of romantic relationships at work to include potential benefits. At a time when organizations are increasingly focusing on employee health, organizations may find ways to promote positive mental health gains (and limit any damage) for their employees through supporting romantic relationships.

Consistent with this new perspective, the purpose of this chapter is twofold. First, we provide an overview of the nature, development, and potential outcomes of romantic relationships at work, and how these outcomes are influenced by the internal relationship dynamics, organizational environment, and the management interventions or responses used in the face of workplace relationships. Second, we offer a way of thinking about romantic relationships at work that is consistent with current organizational and societal realities. Our thinking is guided by two fundamental assumptions: romantic relationships at work (a) are inevitable, and (b) can have positive benefits for well-being.

### Development of romantic relationships at work

Sternberg (1986) characterizes love – the cornerstone of a romantic relationship – as consisting of three main components: intimacy, passion, and commitment. Research has identified several factors that are important in the development of love in general, all of which have considerable importance in the organizational context. Specifically, the opportunity to interact, repeated exposure, attitude similarity, and desire to foster a romantic relationship are precursors to romantic relationships (Pierce, Byrne, and Aguinis, 1996). It is not surprising, then, that at least a third of relationships begin in the workplace (Bordwin, 1994), as it is likely that these factors will be present.

#### *Proximity*

To begin, the opportunity for interaction is a necessary precursor for a romantic relationship (Horn and Horn, 1982; Paul and Townsend, 1998). Surveying individuals in a New York airport, Quinn (1977) found that three types of proximity create opportunities for interaction in the workplace. This is critical because “without the opportunity for interaction, there can be no opportunity for attraction” (Byrne and Neuman, 1992: 32). The first is ongoing geographic proximity. For example, with employees’ workstations being ever closer together, employees are enjoying better opportunities for close interactions. The second proximity criterion involves interrelated work tasks. Working interdependently maximizes opportunities for socialization (e.g. training, teamwork, business trips, meetings). The third type of proximity that facilitates interaction is occasional contact. Encountering other employees (e.g. in elevators, at meetings) provides opportunities for interaction (Pierce *et al.*, 1996). Thus, the increasing proximity that characterizes current workplaces heightens the likelihood of romantic relationships at work.

#### *Repeated exposure*

By itself, however, opportunities for interaction may be insufficient. But having this occur repeatedly substantially increases the likelihood of a workplace romance. When people work together and see each other regularly, research shows that it is more likely they will become attracted to one another (Pierce *et al.*, 1996).

#### *Liking*

In addition to proximity and repeated exposure, employees must also share similar attitudes, and want to foster and engage in a romantic

relationship. Perceived similarity in attitudes can result in liking (Pierce *et al.*, 1996); “liking” is clearly a precursor to romantic relationships when both parties are interested in fostering a relationship. This involves a mutual sexual attraction, and both parties wanting to be in a romantic relationship (Mainiero, 1986).

By its very nature, then, the workplace environment would encourage the development of romantic relationships. In fact, recent changes in the nature of work and workplaces mean that the likelihood of developing romantic relationships at work may be more pronounced today than in the workplace of yesteryear. Today’s workplaces are characterized by a blurring of the work–life and work–family balance for many; teamwork, flexitime, overtime, teleworking, shift work, frequent short-term travel, and longer-term overseas postings due to globalization can cause the boundaries of work and personal life to overlap. In addition, North American data show that younger people are focusing more on careers and choosing to stay single for longer (Loughlin and Barling, 2001). Taken together, these factors provide additional opportunities for proximity, repeated exposure, and liking, which strongly support our first assumption: romantic relationships at work are now close to inevitable. But what does this mean for organizations and their members?

### Consequences of workplace romantic relationships

The impact of workplace romantic relationships varies considerably across situations and people. In the past, however, attention has focused overwhelmingly on the negative repercussions of office romances. In fact, the outcomes of a workplace relationship need not be negative; they can also be positive, or nonexistent (Quinn, 1977), and can affect not only the individual but also the organization. We now focus our attention on consequences of workplace relationships, and look at productivity, morale, intragroup conflict, and sexual harassment.

#### *Productivity*

Productivity is frequently viewed as being hurt by romantic relationships; however, whether the effect is positive or negative remains elusive. In some case studies, romantic relationships resulted in decreases in productivity, presumably because during a relationship participants are cognitively distracted, and are thus more prone to errors and mistakes, are more frequently late, and are more likely to miss meetings (Quinn and Lees, 1984). However, there is also evidence that for some couples,

workplace romances increase quantitative and qualitative productivity (Mainiero, 1986). Other studies report no significant effect on productivity as the result of romantic relationship (Pierce and Aguinis, 2003; Perce *et al.*, 1996).

One possibility is that any effects on productivity are situationally dependent, and future research needs to uncover the situational factors that moderate the link between romantic relationships at work and productivity. At the same time, research should assess whether there are any effects on team performance. Recent research on sexual harassment in North America shows that team performance is hurt when a member of the team is sexually harassed (Raver and Gelfand, 2005), and research should address the effects of workplace romantic relationships on team performance.

#### Morale

A second area potentially affected by a workplace romance is employee morale (Mainiero, 1989; Pierce *et al.*, 1996; Quinn, 1977). In fact, 34% of women surveyed by Mainiero (1989) found that an office romance was energizing and had a positive impact on morale. Yet other studies suggest that morale is lowered as a result of office relationships (Pierce *et al.*, 1996). Again, the different outcomes are likely a function of situational differences. As one example, it is possible that jealousy on the part of coworkers may influence how they respond to the development of such a relationship.

#### Intragroup conflict

Teamwork can also be affected by workplace relationships. Although positive effects of romance on the group have been reported (e.g. improved communication, reduced tension; Paul and Townsend, 1998), conflict in workgroups is not uncommon. The most frequently discussed outcomes are reduced productivity (Quinn and Lees, 1984), and gossip among group members (Pierce *et al.*, 1996), which itself might account for some of the reductions in group productivity.

Depending on the positions of the employees relative to each other, intragroup conflict can be exacerbated by role conflict. This occurs when a situation simultaneously requires conflicting or different behavior from one's personal and professional roles (Paul and Townsend 1998). This could affect productivity and turnover if the workplace romantic relationships result in favoritism, or the perception of favoritism (Schaefer and

Tudor, 2001). So, the outcome of romance on teamwork is often negative, but not uniformly so.

#### Sexual harassment

The last, and most serious, consequence of relationships in the workplace is sexual harassment. Concern has often been expressed that romantic relationships at work open the organization to potential sexual harassment charges (e.g. Bordwin, 1994; Paul and Townsend, 1998; Quinn, 1977). This is a serious concern, because according to the Society of Human Resource Management (1998), 24% of sexual harassment charges emanate from romantic relationships at work. One possibility is that if a relationship 'goes sour', one partner (most commonly the woman) may file a sexual harassment claim (Jones, 1999; Karl and Sutton, 2000). Another possibility is that a dissolved relationship may foster sexually harassing behavior (Pierce and Aguinis, 2004), and this is one of the most common arguments for having strict policies against workplace romantic relationships.

As can be seen, the possible outcomes of romantic relationships at work on productivity, morale, teamwork and sexual harassment are not uniform, and depend instead on the situation. But then what contextual factors make a difference to these outcomes? We suggest that three groups of contextual factors are important to consider. These are (1) the internal dynamics of the relationship, (2) the organizational environment, and (3) management interventions. We now focus on how each of these contextual factors mitigates the effect of a workplace romance on the individuals as well as the organization.

#### Factors that mitigate romantic relationships at work

##### Relationship type

The type of the relationship is important in predicting its possible effects in an organizational setting. Quinn and Lees (1984) suggest that there are three general workplace relationship categories. The first is *true love*, a relationship with altruistic motives and a long-term orientation. The second category is a *fling*, which is typified by intense emotions and a short-term orientation. Last is a *utilitarian relationship*, where the relationship is used to obtain extrinsic benefits such as power or status within the organization.

The reason for labeling relationships into one of these categories is not to define the relationship, but to establish how it is perceived by others in

the workplace, as other employees will react differently depending on what they perceive to be the motives of the partners (Quinn, 1977). For example, it is more likely that the impact on morale and teamwork will be positive if it is a *true love* relationship, and even more so if it endures. Oppositely, the most negative effects can be predicted for a *utilitarian* relationship (Jones, 1999), because it has the highest potential for favoritism which can negatively affect productivity, morale, and teamwork. Also, where one partner feels exploited by the other, her/his productivity is likely to suffer (Mainiero, 1986). It is possible for a *fling* to have a minimal or non-existent impact since it is often short-lived. However, due to the intense nature of the relationship, it is also more likely to be volatile and end badly for at least one of the partners, which would have a negative impact on productivity and group work. Thus, the type of relationship will influence the impact of the relationship on the organization.

Once the relationship forms, the couple's behavior is important in determining the impact of the relationship on the organization. If the two people are able to act professionally when they are at work, it is less likely that there will be a negative reaction by co-workers (Karl and Sutton, 2000). This professionalism can also be conceptualized as maintaining a balance between the poles of intimacy and distance. Both extreme intimacy and extreme distance can have negative effects on a workgroup (e.g. increased hostility, distorted communication), and reduced productivity, reduced employee morale, and group conflict are likely. However, if the two are able to maintain an appropriate level of separation between their personal and work relationship, dysfunctional effects on their workgroup may be avoided (Paul and Townsend, 1998).

#### *Power distance*

Another internal relationship factor that influences the organizational consequences of the romance is the power dynamic within the relationship. There are two main types of relationships that can occur within organizations, namely lateral (peer-to-peer) and hierarchal (supervisor-subordinate) relationships (Karl and Sutton, 2000). Hierarchal relationships are generally of greater concern to the organization since they are seen to be more disruptive than co-worker relationships (Jones, 1999); "most co-workers and peers feel anxious about the impact of an intimate relationship on their own working relationships with the individuals involved" (Powell, 1986: 30). Because of this, 70% of North American companies have formal policies prohibiting such relationships (Schaefer and Tudor, 2001).

There are several factors which render hierarchal relationships more contentious. The first has to do with assumptions co-workers make about the motives of the couple. Even though co-workers are not able to accurately determine the motives of participants (Mainiero, 1986), utilitarian motives are usually perceived to be what underlies hierarchal relationships, especially when the lower-level employee is female (Jones, 1999; Powell, 2001). Because the perception of utilitarian motives increases the likelihood that negative repercussions will occur, this is one reason why a hierarchal relationship is more likely to result in negative organizational consequences.

Another perspective on hierarchal relationships is taken from social exchange theory. The difficulty with a hierarchal relationship is the inherent power imbalance. Relationships are usually based on the exchange of resources between equal partners. These resources can be socio-economic, or personal/sexual in nature. However, when a work-place relationship involves a hierarchal imbalance, workplace resources such as salary, performance evaluations, and work assignments can be affected (Jones, 1999; Pierce *et al.*, 2000). In one study, participants in hierarchal relationships were, in the most extreme cases, found to be favouring their partner (e.g. allotting promotions, flaunting power; Quinn 1977). Even if favors are not offered, the perception remains among co-workers that such preferential treatment could occur. Negative consequences in the organization such as reduced morale and intragroup conflict will be far more likely when co-workers perceive the potential for a relationship to be exploitative (Mainiero, 1986).

Mainiero suggests that thinking of the relationship as a power coalition – a political tool used to accrue power (Pfeffer, 1981) – is another way to conceptualize how a hierarchal relationship would affect the organization. This is relevant to workplace romances because a hierarchal relationship can constitute a power coalition, which provides the opportunity to participate in an exchange of resources from which other employees are excluded (Mainiero, 1986). So, if employees feel that a coalition has been formed from which they are excluded, retaliation and aggression (Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, and Stucke, 2001) and even poorer health (Cohen, 2004) may well result. As Berry and Worthington (2001: 447) note, "Interpersonal relationships can influence physical and mental health . . . social isolation and loneliness increase the risk for morbidity and mortality."

Two additional issues related to power distance need to be considered. First, because the power difference between the partners may affect how others respond to the workplace relationship, it is possible that the partners' gender complicates this effect. Specifically, perceptions of the role of power within the relationship may well differ depending on whether the female partner is at a higher or lower status in the organizational hierarchy.

A second issue must be considered: throughout this chapter, it is assumed that all relationships under discussion are heterosexual in nature. While gay couples may well have more concerns about making their relationships public knowledge, prejudices on the part of co-workers would probably affect their responses to gay romantic relationships in the workplace.

#### *Relationship dissolution*

Perhaps the most obvious and most common factor contributing to negative relationship outcomes at work is the dissolution of that relationship. It is possible that many positive outcomes will naturally occur as the result of a relationship, but it is less likely that positive outcomes will naturally occur from the dissolution of that relationship. One study showed that 48% of workplace relationships end in dissolution (Pierce and Aguinis, 2001). As mentioned earlier, the dissolution of a romantic relationship can create difficulties for the employees involved, their teams, and the organization as a whole. However, the potential benefits from maintaining open lines of communication and supporting one's employees when they need it most is not always apparent. Yet, such situations provide a unique opportunity for management to support its employees, and such managerial support will provide vicarious and symbolic leadership during difficult times. As Stanford economist Paul Romer reminds us, "A crisis is a terrible thing to waste."

Thus, characteristics of the romantic relationship mitigate its impact on the organization. However, these characteristics alone cannot explain all the variance in workplace outcomes; aspects of the organizational environment further mitigate the effects of romantic relationships.

#### *Organizational environment*

Two components of the organizational environment influence the impact an office romance has on the organization, namely organizational culture and workgroup characteristics.

#### *Organizational culture*

Organizational culture, which constitutes the organization's "personality" and encompasses its norms, attitudes, and values (Foley and Powell, 1999), could mitigate any impact of workplace relationships. Organizational culture dictates what is regarded as appropriate behavior within the firm, and influences employee reactions toward relationships (Pierce *et al.*, 1996). Due to both selection and socialization factors, individuals

working in a conservative culture will be more likely to exhibit negative attitudes toward workplace relationships than those working in a liberal culture (Foley and Powell, 1999; Pierce *et al.*, 1996).

The effects of organizational culture are also manifest or signaled through managements' attitudes and behaviors (Pierce *et al.*, 1996). Where managers hold negative attitudes toward romantic relationships at work, these attitudes are transmitted to subordinates. Under such conditions, other employees may be less accepting of, and more likely to react negatively to, romantic relationships at work.

#### *Workgroup characteristics*

Workgroup characteristics are the second integral part of the organizational environment that may mitigate the outcomes of romantic relationships at work. Quinn (1977) noted that the most important characteristics that can influence relationship outcomes are group climate, closeness of supervision, closeness of interpersonal relationships, and the intensity or importance of the work or mission. Some groups will have strict unwritten rules for becoming involved with a co-worker. Still others will encourage romantic relationships.

Group climate can be conceptualized as comprising the group's informal policies, practices, and procedures. This concept is extended to romantic relationships by Powell (2001), who discussed the importance of group expectations. He found that if the group expected that a relationship would result in work disruption, there was a greater likelihood members would react negatively. Employees' prior experience with workplace romances also creates expectations within the group. Jones (1999) found that individuals who either had been in a romantic relationship at work, and/or who had positive experiences with them in the past, would react more positively to co-workers engaging in a relationship. Workgroup climate can have a strong influence on couple behavior; Quinn (1977) showed that when the climate expressed disapproval, participants experienced pressure to dissolve the relationship, illustrating the power of the workgroup to influence the consequences of the relationship not only for the organization, but also for the couple involved.

#### **Managerial interventions**

After considering the internal relationship dynamics and organizational environment, the last major factor that will mitigate the consequences of a romantic relationship is the type of management action used by the organization in response to a romantic relationship. Organizations vary

considerably in how management acts or reacts in response to romantic relationships at work. These responses are critical not just in their potential impact on the romantic relationship. Instead, how organizations respond may well have effects beyond the partners in the relationship, as they signal to other employees how management responds to difficult situations in general. Essentially, organizations can choose to respond punitively (e.g. reprimands, transfers, terminations), positively (e.g. counseling employees) or not at all.

#### *Punitive action*

Policies constitute one of the simplest ways to deal with workplace romances. Having a strict policy disallowing romantic relationships at work provides managers with guidelines as to how to react to a workplace relationship (e.g. reprimand, relocation, termination), and legitimates any management actions along these lines. Such policies are most common in conservative organizational cultures; whether it is because of the culture and/or the policy, employees may be less willing to become involved in workplace relationships (Foley and Powell, 1999). In a survey of undergraduate and MBA students (Powell, 1986), respondents agreed that managers should dissuade employees from becoming romantically involved. However, just over a decade later, Karl and Sutton (2000) found that 92% of companies have no formal policies that prohibit co-workers from dating one another. It is possible that this is because people have become more tolerant of workplace relationships: in 1987, 39% of employees felt that a workplace relationship was none of the company's business (Karl and Sutton, 2000); by 1994, 70% responded similarly (Jones, 1999).

However, this argument does not necessarily extend to all relationships. Hierarchical relationships are still thought to be potentially disruptive and worth regulating. Many employers, who do not create policies prohibiting romantic relationships, do have a written rule prohibiting supervisor-subordinate relationships (Schaefer and Tudor, 2000). Even participants who had neutral responses to co-workers becoming romantically involved felt that if a supervisor is involved, he/she should be reprimanded (Powell, 1986).

Nonetheless, it may be naïve to think that two employees who enjoy geographical proximity, are sufficiently attracted to each other, and are motivated to initiate a relationship would be willing to disengage because of the existence of company rules or policies.

Managers can create policies and rules promising serious consequences for violation of their dating policies, but it's impossible to prevent people from being

attracted to one another and falling in love. Strict rules merely force employees to go underground with their relationship. (Schaefer and Tudor, 2001: 5)

Thus, couples may be more likely to hide than to terminate their relationship, and some organizational policies may thereby have unintended negative consequences.

There are also legal considerations when creating formal policies against dating. Policies that prohibit relationships could be an invasion of employees' privacy, or an act of discrimination (Bordwin 1994; Paul and Townsend, 1998). Consequently, some jurisdictions (e.g. New York State) have passed legislation prohibiting such organizational policies (Jones, 1999). Thus, a formal policy against workplace relationships may not be the most effective form of management reaction to a romantic relationship at work.

Where an organization may not want to institute formal policies, informal policies may exist instead. These "unwritten" rules reflect one way for employers to deter employees from becoming involved in relationships with each other, without explicitly forbidding the relationships. However, the implementation of informal policies is usually inconsistent. Some employees may know and understand these "rules"; others may be unaware. As a result, the informal policy would probably not achieve its objective, and might even set the stage for conflict among team members (Schaefer and Tudor, 2000).

#### *Positive action*

Another managerial option is to take positive action. This includes openly discussing the relationship and counseling the couple on what to do (Foley and Powell, 1999). This approach is proactive because it could potentially prevent reductions in productivity and team conflict by articulating the risks involved in a workplace relationship, as well as management's expectations (e.g. continued punctuality, awareness of public displays of affection). In a study of hierarchal relationships, this approach was found, by employees, to be the preferred action for management to take (Powell 2001). A positive and proactive approach recognizes that stopping relationships in the workplace is close to futile. But by maintaining an open dialogue with employees, potentially negative consequences for the organization are much less likely to be a concern.

#### *No action*

Finally, if management chooses not to take punitive or positive action, the default position is no action. This may not necessarily constitute

laissez-faire leadership, however. Organizations can take the explicit stance that romantic matters are the personal business of the individuals involved, and not the concern of management. According to Foley and Powell (1999), this is the most common response to romantic relationships in the workplace. In practice, organizations generally do not take effective action (Jones, 1999). In fact, even when a relationship has begun to exert negative effects on the organization, the problem is often ignored (Powell, 2001; Quinn, 1977; Quinn and Lees, 1984). Although ignoring the problem is often the path of least resistance for managers, there are situations where ignoring the relationship could actually exacerbate the negative consequences for the organization.

Thus, managers have several options when encountering workplace relationships. They can take punitive action, positive action, or no action. The choices management make will influence how the organization is affected by the romantic relationship both directly and indirectly. Thus, if the action management takes is so significant, what action *should* management take to maximize the positive effects of the relationship and minimize the negative ones?

Like most other issues relating to workplace relationships, determining the "best" action is not an uncomplicated decision. Schaefer and Tudor (2001) assert that in today's complex workplaces, the most appropriate action may be to create specific policies to regulate workplace romances. Some executives believe companies need definitive strategies to guide responses to romantic relationships at work. However, Karl and Sutton (2000) found that half of respondents in a 1994 survey felt that companies should outline expectations for workplace romances, but should not attempt to ban these relationships. Clearly, there is no one right answer for how to manage these delicate situations.

Nonetheless, a common theme in the literature would suggest that *how* management chooses what to do may be as important as the actual decision they make. Essentially, any implementation should maximize employee perceptions of justice. Listening to employees and offering counseling (Karl and Sutton, 2000), and respecting employees' decisions and judgement, would enhance interpersonal justice. Ensuring that there is no favoritism and that outcomes are allocated to employees according to their contribution would enhance distributive justice, while ensuring that employees have input into formal policies relating to romantic relationships at work (Greenberg, 1994) would augment perceptions of procedural fairness. However, what might be perceived as fair is situationally dependent: for example, stricter policies were perceived by employees as fair when it was stated that productivity had declined as a result of the relationship (Karl and Sutton, 2000). If employees are more

accepting of workplace relationships, the negative consequences attributed to romantic relationships resulting from increased tension, reduced communication, and favoritism are less apt to appear.

A model proposed by Foley and Powell (1999) suggests that employees develop preferences for management action or inaction in workplace romances, which influence their perception of distributive justice in the organization, which in turn affects their attitudes and behaviors. Further, they propose that because employees tend to retaliate when they perceive injustice, if employees believe the actions taken by management are fair, the organization will experience fewer negative consequences such as decreased morale or productivity.

So, if it is true that the negative consequences of workplace relationships are moderated by whether or not fellow employees believe the actions taken by management are fair, it would be in an organization's best interests to ensure they are creating and implementing policies and following practices that are perceived by employees to be just.

### Concluding thoughts

Relationships are the "stuff of life", and this is no less true in organizations. Whether in school, at work, or at play, if the conditions of proximity, repeated exposure, attitude similarity, and attraction are met, romantic relationships are inevitable. In today's diverse and highly interactive workplace, these conditions will almost certainly be present (Pierce *et al.*, 1996; Quinn, 1977). In fact, as found in a study done in the United Kingdom, socialization outside of work is often commonplace and the line between friendships and relationships can itself become blurred (Riach and Wilson, 2006). Historically, organizations have typically been wary of romantic relationships in the workplace – despite their inevitability, and the possibility for some benefits.

Overall, there are several points of consensus in the literature on romantic relationships at work; these concern the precursors and potential for negative consequences of such relationships. However, considering that workplace romances may well be inevitable, there remains insufficient rigorous and current research from which to inform management about a pervasive and significant issue (Jones, 1999). The majority of research in this field is anecdotal or case-based (Powell, 2001) and is cross-sectional (Karl and Sutton, 2000). More experimental and longitudinal designs are needed. Much of the research is dated, having been conducted in the 1970s and 1980s at a time when women were just beginning to become a significant part of the workforce. Therefore, old assumptions and theories should be retested, in today's workplace.



Perhaps most significantly, the very form of the question posed in research needs to change. Research on maternal employment in the 1970s and 1980s consistently showed its negative effects; yet a close examination of this research revealed that research had overwhelmingly focused on negative outcomes (Barling, 1990). Only when the research started to ask about potential beneficial effects of maternal employment did such effects become apparent. A similar situation may well exist with research on romantic relationships at work. Guided by social and managerial stereotypes, most research has focused on potential negative effects emerging from romantic relationships at work. Yet organizational experience, lessons learned from research on maternal employment, and findings from the emerging fields of positive psychology and positive organizational behavior all dictate that research should now ask about the possible benefits of romantic relationships at work, for organizations as well as for their members.

In conclusion, the impacts of relationships vary considerably across situations. The role of the organization can no longer be to dictate how or when romantic relationships can occur. Indeed, it may well be impossible to do so. Instead, organizations should focus on finding ways to support romantic relationships in the workplace. By taking a positive and proactive stance on workplace relationships, organizations may be able to foster and support love, well-being, and productivity.

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## 11 Ethnic diversity at work: an overview of theories and research

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Ethnic diversity in the workforce is a subject of growing interest for western organizations. In EU countries, continuous immigration flows of post-war guest workers and their family members, ex-colonial immigrants, political refugees, and highly educated workers have led to an increase of people with a foreign nationality (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2003). However, foreign population percentages vary significantly between EU countries. For instance, Luxembourg (39.9%), Austria (10.3%), Germany (9.5%), and Belgium (9.1%) have relatively high rates, whereas the lowest rates, of about 2%, are found in Greece, Finland, Portugal, Spain, and Italy. Other EU countries fall somewhere in between these two extremes, such as the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, the UK, and France, with percentages ranging from 4.3 to 6% (OECD, 2003). In the future, ethnic diversity in many EU countries is likely to increase even further as demographic figures indicate that net-migration flows (immigration minus emigration) are larger than the natural growth of national populations (Ekamper and Wetters, 2005; OECD, 2003).

The increase in ethnic diversity, along with accompanying demographic developments, have had a significant impact on the composition of the workforce. About fifty years ago, the demographic features of most work organizations were fairly homogeneous (Williams and O'Reilly, 1998). Many employees shared a similar ethnic background, were male, and worked for the same employer throughout their working lives. Nowadays, managers are confronted with teams and departments that are more diverse in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, organizational tenure, functional background, educational background, and so on. Therefore, a growing number of companies (e.g. IBM, Siemens, Shell) have formulated diversity policies that are aimed at managing a diverse labor force. The reason for formulating diversity policies is often twofold: (1) it is considered to be a moral duty to have a labor force which mirrors the