

## "My affair ruined my career"

"I slept with my boss, Steve, while I was on a three-day conference in Tasmania," says Claire, a retail buyer. "We'd always had a really flirtatious working relationship and, on the first night of the conference, a group of us went out dancing and then went for a night-cap at the bar in the hotel where we were staying. One by one, people drifted off to their rooms and, in the end, Steve and I were the only ones left at the table. He asked me if he could kiss me, and I readily agreed. I was a little drunk and feeling very aroused. Away from work, I felt liberated from the usual conventions that had held us back from expressing our mutual desire for each other."

"We went back to my hotel room and made love twice during the night. The sex was really passionate, and I felt completely uninhibited. Steve promised me that, when he got back home, he was going to tell his wife it was all over and leave. For the four nights of the conference, we slept together and lay curled up, sharing intimate details about our past and our feelings for each other. "By the time we got back, I had let myself fall totally in love, so I was horrified when I returned to work on Monday morning and Steve said, 'I'm

sorry, I made a mistake. I should never have become involved with you and I want you to know that it's over."

"I was devastated and felt like I'd been publicly humiliated, now the gossip had got around and everyone knew what had happened. To try to save face, I pretended Steve and I had intended the affair to be a short fling, but I felt like a stupid schoolgirl. I spent hours feeling shattered and worrying that people would think I was an easy lay."

"The work environment that I'd once loved now felt like a prison. I couldn't concentrate on my job, and my working relationship with Steve had become stilted and awkward. I was forever touching up my make-up to hide the tell-tale redness from tears and, at one point, one of my managers actually called me into his office and told me to pull myself together. In the end, I was overlooked for a promotion I was sure I'd had in the bag."

"Because I couldn't deal with what had happened, people lost respect for me. They now had me pegged as some weak, unbalanced Glenn Close *Fatal Attraction* type. For my sanity, I was forced to resign. Now, I'm in another company, starting from the bottom again. My misjudged affair has put my career back years."

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women (24 per cent), compared to men (17 per cent). But an astounding 79 per cent of workers are abstaining from relationships in the workplace altogether.

Why? "I work a 60-hour week and I barely manage to fit in meals, let alone sex," says Valerie, a single, 40-year-old marketing manager. "I find my boss extremely appealing, but would I sleep with him? Definitely not. I don't have the time or energy for an office romance."

Others are too career conscious. "If I slept with someone at work, I might give away personal secrets or chinks in my armour that could later harm my professional reputation," says Alanna, 35, an advertising executive.

In the film *Disclosure*, Michael Douglas is accused of sexually assaulting his new manager, Demi Moore. In truth, his only transgression is that he's naive enough to be alone with a female co-worker late at night in the office. Back rubs, uninvited compliments and informal meetings over a bottle of wine are no longer acceptable in the workplace. Sexual-harassment legislation is now taken very seriously and its existence bubbles under the surface of every male/female staff relationship. This has led to a new overt and covert code of office politics and policy.

"A lot of companies are coming to us and saying, 'What is the definition of sexual harassment, what are our responsibilities and what kind of training can we provide our managers,'" says Michael Sparks, complaints resolution manager for the Anti Discrimination Board of NSW. "In 1997, there was a tightening up of sexual harassment legislation in NSW, and if an employer or company owner has not taken all steps to make sure sexual harassment doesn't occur in the workplace, they may be held vicariously liable for the behaviour of an employee."

Ironic isn't it? Office romance is more risky than ever before, in the decade where the average working week has crept up to 43 hours plus overtime and it's more difficult to meet potential partners anywhere but work.

When does office romance peak? At Christmas parties, conferences and during intense work periods, when one too many post-work drinks may cause the strictly corporate facade of co-workers to melt in a kiss. "I never thought about Graham in a sexual way until we were thrown together on a project, where we were working long hours to tight deadlines," says Lucinda, 33. "We hit it off so well that we ended up lunching together almost every day. When I went home, he was all I could think about."

Carers psychologist Meredith Fuller calls this "the halo effect." "When you're working on an intense project, it's complex and stressed and you're using all your creative juices, sometimes pushing on late into the night to meet deadlines...You can misinterpret this passion for your project as romantic passion."

Anecdotally, Fuller says that she has noticed an increase in lateral affairs – romance between peers at the same work level. This could well explain why 15 per cent of respondents we surveyed said that having an affair had no effect on their career. In fact, 2 per cent felt that the impact was positive: "It made my working life better," "Work is less stressful" and "I am better able to keep work in perspective", they said.

However, 4 per cent admitted it adversely affected their working life. "I can't concentrate. I'm constantly paranoid about someone finding out", "My work suffered", "I left; it was too awkward" and "I led to my sacking" were some comments. What are the odds of an office romance lasting beyond the initial throes of passion? Two to one against, according to our survey.

Regardless of the outcome, an office fling impacts on everyone in the work team. "Co-workers might feel resentment, envy or concern about possible betrayal of trust," explains Fuller. "They may fear that things expressed in confidence in the past will become the subject of pillow talk. They may feel compromised if they're expected to collude in concealing the affair to management or the partner of their co-worker."

In light of potential complications, most couples keep their office affair a secret for as long as possible. Once it becomes public knowledge, they often become lovers by night and strangers by day.

Bonita, a 35-year-old sales rep, had a tempestuous affair with Gerry, a fellow sales rep. "It was hard not to feel competitive if his figures were better than mine," she recalls. "If he said something stupid in a meeting, I felt embarrassed for him. When he was promoted, it got worse. I found it demoralising to be his equal in bed but his subordinate at work. At the office, he made such a point of being seen to be fair that he was harder on me than other reps. And I soon grew tired of his jokes about me sleeping my way to the top. After eight months, I broke off the relationship. It took a year before I felt comfortable at work again."

When an office romance ends, the fallout may be long-term. "It's hard enough splitting up with a partner, but in the workplace, you have the added stress of having to face that person every day," says Fuller.

Too much hard work? That seems to be the consensus. So for kicks around the office, an increasing number of career women are engaging in serial flirtation. That way, they can enjoy all the sensual highs of an office romance without the potential pitfalls.

"I'm extremely attracted to Leon, who has the office next door to mine, but, although I fantasise about him, I keep my hands to myself," says Deirdre, a Sydney architect. "We have long lunches together and tell each other intimate details about our personal lives. When we're together, there's a constant sexual subtext – but the seduction is purely cerebral, and it'll stay that way. I've made too many sacrifices to risk my professional reputation for a romance that might be short-lived."

\* Names have been changed.

## What you said about office affairs

### Managers seek more romance

"Workers in managerial positions were more likely to have an office affair." Respondents were asked: "Have you or a friend or colleague had an affair in the office or a work or office romance, that is, a sexual relationship with someone who works for the same company as you?"

	Prof/manager/owner	Other white collar	Skilled
	%	%	%
Yes	25	23	11
No/can't say	75	77	89

### Who turns lust into love?

"Unskilled workers tend to have office flings rather than serious relationships." The 21 per cent of respondents having an affair were asked: "Thinking of the last time you had an affair in the office, did the relationship end or is it still going on?"

	Prof/manager/owner	Other white collar	Skilled
	%	%	%
Ended	14	14	6
Continuing	11	8	5
Can't say	—	1	—

### What price an affair?

"Women are more affected by office romances than men." Workers who'd had an affair were asked: "Has the affair affected your working life in any way?"

	Women	Men
	%	%
Negative effect	6	3
Positive effect	2	1
Total affected	8	4
No, not affected	16	13

### Age matters

"Older and younger women are less likely to have an affair." The age and percentage of workers who'd engaged in an affair were asked: "Thinking of the last time you had an affair in the office, what was your age at the time?"

	18-24yrs	25-34yrs	35-49yrs
	%	%	%
Yes	13	28	21
No	87	72	79

For our survey, 714 working men and women were interviewed throughout Australia, on March 11, 12, 18 and 19, 1998.