

## Romancing the Workplace

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Most articles about sexual harassment allegations in the workplace focus on completely unwanted advances, comments, or other such behaviors. But sexual harassment in the workplace can also result from fractured office romances, greatly complicating the issue. Fortunately, there are steps a company can take to minimize the risks of such an outcome.

When office romance ends, it's possible that the jilted party either won't want to let it end or will want revenge. Either situation can give rise to complaints of harassment, particularly where one participant in the relationship later claims that, rather than a romance, the relationship was actually stalking or harassment.

Employers in most states are prohibited from explicitly preventing employees from engaging in romantic relationships. However, in situations where there is a romantic relationship between a supervisor and a subordinate an employer has a stronger case to make against the relationship.

To implement such a policy companies should stress that these types of relationships create a conflict of interest. There are laws in many states that allow companies to dictate workplace policies and procedures to remove conflicts of interest.

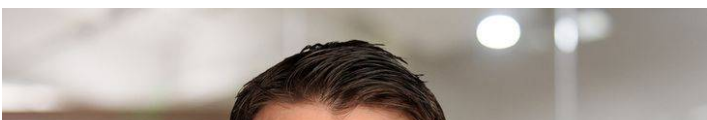
Another tactic is to require employees to execute what is called a Love Contract. This document, though not technically a contract, formalizes the consensual nature of a workplace romance.

Companies must be mindful that, despite their best efforts, complaints of harassment can arise and can lead to lawsuits related to the actions alleged and the employer's response to the complaints. Companies can reduce the likelihood of harassment lawsuits stemming from romantic workplace relationships by preventing relationships between subordinates and managers and by implementing Love Contracts.

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