

Wedded work bliss: the office spouse

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It's not a love connection but there are corporate couples who share a marriage-like relationship on the job. And they say the bond makes them happier and better employees.

It's been almost 20 years since the day they first met, but Krista Hiddema and Stuart Ducoffe say they're closer than ever.

They spend most of their waking hours together. They travel frequently side by side. And even when they're apart, they manage to hook up by phone.

"We are so connected to one another," Ms. Hiddema, a human resource specialist who works alongside Mr. Ducoffe, an employment lawyer, at e2r Solutions, the HR consulting arm of the Toronto law firm Woolgar VanWiechen Ketcheson Ducoffe, LLP. "We know each other so well, I can often predict what he is going to say."

Another love connection at work? Whoa, says Ms. Hiddema and Mr. Ducoffe. While they may be spending countless hours together and are so close they often communicate without speaking, there is nothing romantic about their relationship, they say.

They're simply office mates who also happen to be soul mates.

Or, to use a term that has come into vogue, Ms. Hiddema and Mr. Ducoffe are office spouses -- corporate couples bound by mutual respect, common interests and that particular chemistry of friendship.

"I often joke that Stuart is my daytime husband," says Ms. Hiddema, who got married two-and-a-half years ago to her "real" husband. Mr. Ducoffe is engaged.

"But while I would admit that I had girlfriends who said, 'why aren't you dating Stuart' and Stuart had friends asking him the same thing about me, we were always just such good friends."

Ms. Hiddema and Mr. Ducoffe aren't the only ones enjoying such close friendships at work with colleagues of the opposite sex. Recent studies show many people are saying "I do" to an office spouse.

In a survey last January by Vault Inc., a New York-based career research firm, 32 per cent of employees acknowledged having an office spouse.

And 17 per cent of Australians said they have workplace husbands and wives, according to a survey last July by LinkMe.com.au, an on-line job network.

The survey was spurred by a dinner party slip of the tongue by U.S. national security adviser Condoleeza Rice, who inadvertently referred to her boss, U.S. president George

Bush, as "my husb. . ." Some observers interpreted that verbal stumble as a sign that she saw Mr. Bush as her office spouse.

Men and women have long enjoyed friendships at work, experts say. But as more women have climbed the corporate ladder, male and female employees are increasingly working as peers.

Throw them into an environment where they're told to work as a tightly knit team and forced to spend long hours together, and it isn't surprising that many develop strong personal bonds, says Julian Barling, associate dean and professor of organizational behaviour and psychology at the Queens School of Business in Kingston, Ont.

"People today are spending more time at work in physical surroundings that make it more likely that romantic or deep-seated, non-romantic relationships will develop," he says. "You put people in cubicles together and you expect them to work closely together, so what do you expect?"

David Irvine, a human dynamics expert and author based in Cochrane, Alta., says that office-spouse relationships are a natural byproduct of employers' demands for greater creativity at work.

"I think we're seeing more of these types of relationships because companies are encouraging more innovation, creativity and passion in the workplace," he says. "And when you're more creative, you're more vulnerable and more open to people."

Mr. Irvine says he dislikes the term "office spouse" -- as does Prof. Barling, who says it has negative connotations, though he believes the close friendship at the core of such a relationship is generally beneficial for workplace partners and their employers.

Having a close chum at work makes employees happier about coming to the office, Mr. Irvine says. And everyone knows a happier employee is a more productive and loyal employee.

Research from the Gallup Organization supports this belief. Between 2002 and 2004, Gallup interviewed 4.5 million employees across the United States and found that about 30 per cent had a best friend in the office.

Of this group, close to 60 per cent said they felt engaged on the job. By comparison, nearly 65 per cent of employees without an office best buddy said they were disengaged.

Scott Richer, marketing manager for Delta Hotels, a subsidiary of Fairmont Hotels & Resorts Inc., says having a best friend at work has made him a better employee.

Two years ago, he formed an affinity with Mary Pattison, Delta's director of marketing. "It lends for a very cohesive environment for us and brings value to our performance. I feel like I'm playing with a teammate who always knows where I'm going to be on the ice."

Ms. Pattison says that having a close male friend at work has helped hone her business skills. She believes men and women generally have different approaches to business, so she pays close attention to how Mr. Richer handles certain work situations.

Being a male-female tag team also comes in handy when dealing with clients and suppliers, she says.

"Sometimes we run into situations where we meet with someone who is just naturally more comfortable having a conversation with someone of the same gender, and we're fine with that."

Similarly, Ms. Hiddema and Mr. Ducoffe say their close relationship allows them to represent both male and female perspectives to clients. And their positive chemistry makes for lively presentations, Mr. Ducoffe adds.

Having a close ally at work also helps relieve some of the stresses of the job, they say.

Instead of simmering all day, they can tell each other their troubles. And because his confidante is a woman, Mr. Ducoffe says he's more comfortable exposing his feelings, even those about his personal life.

"I wouldn't do that with a male colleague; men just don't tend to do that. But I have done it with Krista where we've closed the door and said 'All right, here's a personal aspect of my life that I just need to get off my chest right now.' "

Ms. Pattison says it's nice to be able to lower her defences when she's working with Mr. Richer.

"I can let my hair down. I don't have to be perfect around Scott all the time," she says. "We can be goofy and have our quirks and let it all hang out."

They can also air their disagreements more openly, without worrying about offending the other person, she adds.

But what office spouses should worry about, says human resource experts, is how their thick-as-thieves relationship might affect workplace dynamics.

"Don't be seen as a clique," warns Stephanie Milliken, president of Milliken HR Consulting in Vancouver.

"Be careful about being so close that you start to exclude others."

Office spouses also need to be alert to any appearances of favouritism, she says.

For instance, if they're working as part of a larger team, they shouldn't automatically buddy up. Instead, they should make an effort to reach out to other team members, she says.

All too aware of the dangers, Mr. Richer and Ms. Pattison say they always invite colleagues to join them for lunch, after-dinner drinks, even extra-curricular sports. And although Ms. Pattison is his best friend at work, Mr. Richer says he is also close with a couple of other female colleagues at Delta.

But what about the people at home -- the husbands, wives, boyfriends or girlfriends?

Many respondents to both the Vault and Link.com.au surveys said their significant others had no problems with their close office relationships.

That is certainly the case for Ms. Hiddema's husband, who isn't at all threatened by her relationship with Mr. Ducoffe. And Mr. Ducoffe says his fiancée is just as comfortable with Ms. Hiddema.

Mr. Richer and Ms. Pattison have introduced their significant others at home to their significant others at the office.

"The four of us have met each other, had dinner together and we all like each other," Mr. Richer says.

Their spouses also probably appreciate the fact that they don't have to listen to work stories at the end of the day, he adds.

"Being able to have a relationship with someone who knows exactly what you just went through, it makes going home a lot easier because you don't take stress home that much."

Not that there's a lot of stress to take home, he says, for having Ms. Pattison at the office makes for an enjoyable work day.

"She actually makes up for what I would like to have in salary," he says. "She's one of the reasons I enjoy my job."

Marriage counselling

Here's expert advice on handling office spouse relationships:

Employees

Clear the air. It's an unfortunate reality but close male-female relationships -- even strictly platonic - can set off nasty office rumours. David Irvine, a human dynamics expert, recommends making the relationship clear as soon as possible. "The best place to start would be with a manager. Explain that there is nothing untoward going on and make sure you have the organization's support."

Let others in. The office is no place for exclusive relationships, says HR consultant Stephanie Milliken. Whenever possible, invite co-workers into your circle. Ask them to join you for lunch or that 10-kilometre race you and your office spouse are planning to run.

Put your "real" spouse in the picture. It's a good idea to let your romantic partner get to know your office partner, says Krista Hiddema, an HR management consultant who has an office spouse.

Let common sense be your guide. Should you avoid being alone with your office spouse, sit apart at meetings and touch each other only with a 10-foot pole? It's impossible to put so many restrictions on a close work relationship, but experts say it's

important to set appropriate boundaries, just as you would with any other office colleague. Some no-nos: too much touching, exchanging off-colour jokes, and flirting. "And don't meet at 11 p.m. in a dark bar," Ms. Hiddema says.

Employers

Have a clear workplace conduct policy. Be explicit about what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable behaviours in the workplace, Ms. Hiddema. This lets everyone know upfront what's expected.

Keep an open mind. Companies should resist the urge to clamp down at the first sign of closeness between a male and female employee, Mr. Irvine says. As long as they act within the organization's code of conduct boundaries and aren't disrupting the workplace, their friendships are none of the employer's business, he says.

Encourage team work. "Get people together for coffee, brainstorming sessions, sports and recognition programs," Ms. Milliken says. This not only encourages friendships at work but breaks office cliques.

Address valid concerns right away. If a close relationship in your office is starting to get in the way of work or making other people uncomfortable, tackle the problem right away, Mr. Irvine says. He suggests having a talk with the duo in question. "But do it in a way that respects the employees. Don't cast a negative light on their relationship; instead, get them involved in finding ways to be more inclusive and to make good use of their unique dynamic."

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