The Debate Over the Prohibition of Romance in the Workplace



ABSTRACT

This article examines why an organization might wish to manage workplace romance, and describes a number of alternative approaches to managing dating. At first sight the ethics of dating bans balances the need to protect female employees from harassment against employee rights to privacy and freedom of association – a rights versus rights issue. However, dating bans seem not to be directed at protecting female employees from harm, but rather protect employers from sexual harassment liability claims – an employer self-interest versus employee rights issue. This article advocates a consequentialist approach to the problem, via the factoring in of other harms caused by prohibiting workplace romance. Given that most workplace romances end up in marriage or long-term partnerships, a ban on workplace romance is argued to be antisocial. The incidence of sexual harassment is very low in comparison to the number of longterm relationships initiated in the workplace. This article concludes by citing examples of firms that encourage romance, showing that is feasible to manage any resulting problems within these firms' existing conflict of interest and sexual harassment rules.