

SHRM

Research

2006 Workplace Romance

POLL FINDINGS

A Study by the Society for Human Resource Management
and CareerJournal.com



HR: Leading People,
Leading Organizations



2006 Workplace Romance

POLL FINDINGS

Michael Parks

Survey Research Specialist

SHRM Research

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For more information, please contact:

SHRM Research Department
1800 Duke Street, Alexandria, VA 22314, USA
Phone: (703) 548-3440 Fax: (703) 535-6432
Web: www.shrm.org/research

2006 Workplace Romance Poll Findings

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About This Report

In November 2005, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) and CareerJournal.com, a Web site of *The Wall Street Journal*, jointly conducted an online poll to find out more about workplace romance in organizations. Office romance is an unavoidable topic that comes up in the workplace, and it is important for HR professionals and employees to be informed about business policies and workers' perceptions of this issue. To examine the changes in policies and opinions about workplace romance over the past four years, the results of the 2005 poll were compared with an older version of the survey conducted by SHRM and CareerJournal.com in 2001. Copies of the HR professional and employee versions of the 2005 poll instrument can be found at the end of this report.

About SHRM

The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) is the world's largest association devoted to human resource management. Representing more than 200,000 individual members, the Society's mission is to serve the needs of HR professionals by providing the most essential and comprehensive resources available. As an influential voice, the Society's mission is also to advance the human

resource profession to ensure that HR is recognized as an essential partner in developing and executing organizational strategy. Founded in 1948, SHRM currently has more than 550 affiliated chapters within the United States and members in more than 100 countries. Visit SHRM Online at www.shrm.org.

About CareerJournal.com

CareerJournal.com is *The Wall Street Journal's* career site targeted to executives and professionals. Featuring more than 100,000 top-level jobs and 2,500 articles on all aspects of job hunting and career management, the site attracts 800,000+ unique visitors monthly. CareerJournal.com features salary data, negotiating tips, popular columns from the *Journal* and exclusive content from its own dedicated news staff. Rated the top job site by *Workforce Management* magazine, the site won an EPpy Award as "Best Internet Classified Service under 1 million monthly visitors," won a Webby Business Award from the International Academy of Digital Arts & Sciences, received a Best of the Web award from *Time*, *Forbes* and *American Way* magazines, won a 2005 WEDDLE's User's Choice Award and was selected Best Site by CareerXRoads in their 2005 directory.

About the Author

Michael Parks is a survey research specialist for SHRM. His responsibilities include designing, conducting and analyzing surveys on HR-related topics. He is also the lead analyst on the SHRM/Rutgers LINE™. He has a bachelor's degree in economics from James Madison University and has worked in survey research for the past five years.

Methodology

Both versions of the poll instrument were developed by the SHRM Survey Program and CareerJournal.com. For comparative purposes, both employees and HR professionals received similar questions.

HR Professional Sample

The HR professional sample was randomly selected from SHRM's membership database, which included over 200,000 individual members at the time the poll was conducted. Only members who had not participated in an SHRM survey or poll in the last six months were included in the sampling frame. Members who were students, consultants, academics, located internationally or had no e-mail address on file were excluded from the sampling frame. In late November 2005, an e-mail that included a link to the SHRM/CareerJournal.com Workplace Romance Poll was sent to 3,000 randomly selected SHRM members. Of these, 2,567 e-mails were successfully delivered to respondents, and 493 HR professionals responded, yielding a response rate of 19%. The poll was online for a period of two weeks, and two follow-up e-mail reminders were sent to non-respondents.

Employee Sample

A similar poll was completed by 408 employees. The employee data were gathered from a convenience sample of visitors to the CareerJournal.com Web site—the online poll was given to every 10th visitor of the site. CareerJournal.com visitors tend to be executive-level professionals who are both active and passive job seekers. Readers should proceed with caution when generalizing these results to all employees.

Notes and Caveats

Differences: Conventional statistical methods were used to determine if observed differences were statistically significant (i.e., there is a small likelihood that the differences occurred by chance). Therefore, in most cases, only results that were significant are included, unless otherwise noted.

Generalization of results: As with any research, readers should exercise caution when generalizing results and take individual circumstances and experiences into consideration when making decisions based on these data. While SHRM is confident in its research, it is prudent to understand that the results presented in this report are only truly representative

of the sample of HR professionals and employees responding to the poll.

Number of respondents: The number of respondents (indicated by “n”) is noted in all tables and figures and indicates the number of individuals (not organizations) who provided data relevant to a particular table or figure. The number of respondents varies from table to table because some respondents did not answer all of the questions. Individuals may not have responded to a question on the survey because the question or some of its parts were not applicable or because the requested data were unavailable. This also accounts for the varying number of responses from one table to another or within a table.

Confidence level and margin of error: A confidence level and margin of error give readers some measure of how much they can rely on survey responses to represent all of SHRM member organizations. Given the level of response to the poll, SHRM is 95% confident that responses given by all responding organizations can be generalized to all SHRM member organizations, in general, with a margin of error of approximately 5%. For example, if 64% of the responding organizations reported that they were for-profit, with a 5% margin of error, the reader can be 95% certain that between 59% and 69% of SHRM member organizations are for-profit. It is important to know that the margin of error increases as the sample size decreases.

Key Findings

Organizations have not had a pressing need to institute new workplace romance policies over the past four years. In fact, a great majority of companies do not have a defined policy to address office romances. When an organization does have the need to establish a policy, the policy tends to discourage dating in the workplace rather than prohibit it altogether.

Despite the lack of change in the adoption of office policies, perceptions about romantic involvement between employees have changed. In general, human resource professionals seem less worried about the negative aspects of an office romance between employees. Most notably, the issue of prohibiting romances due to concerns of sexual harassment allegations dropped from 95% to 77%. In contrast, while concerns about sexual harassment claims dropped, fears about retaliation (conflicts between employees when a romance ends) became a larger concern for organizations.

As concerns surrounding workplace romance have changed, so have the restrictions around them in the office. It has become generally accepted that

romances between a supervisor and subordinate are off limits—both employers and employees felt strongly about this (80% and 60% respectively). Organizations are also beginning to feel the need for employees to inform their supervisors of any relationships. In contrast to the growing concerns of HR professionals, employees did not show much desire for increased restrictions around office romances. In fact, in 2005 employees actually were less supportive of restrictions on romance between employees of a significant difference in rank and less worried about public displays of affection compared with 2001.

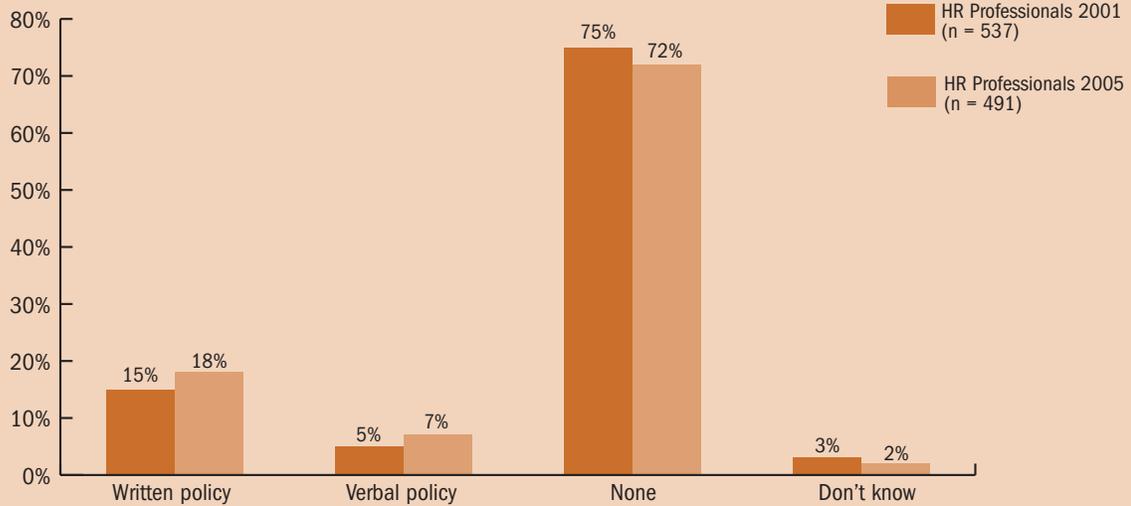
According to HR professionals, there has been little change among the consequences that employees face if they violate the organization's policy on office romance. Alternatively, employees' attitudes have changed greatly in what consequences they feel employees should face. Employees felt much more strongly in 2005 that a formal reprimand was appropriate for workers who violate employee policy. However, fewer employees felt that a termination, demotion or transfer are appropriate penalties.

Poll Results

Organizational Policy

Most organizations did not have policies to address office romance. In both 2001 and 2005, over 70% of organizations reported that they did not have formal written or verbal policies that addressed workplace romance.

Figure 1 Existence of Workplace Romance Policy

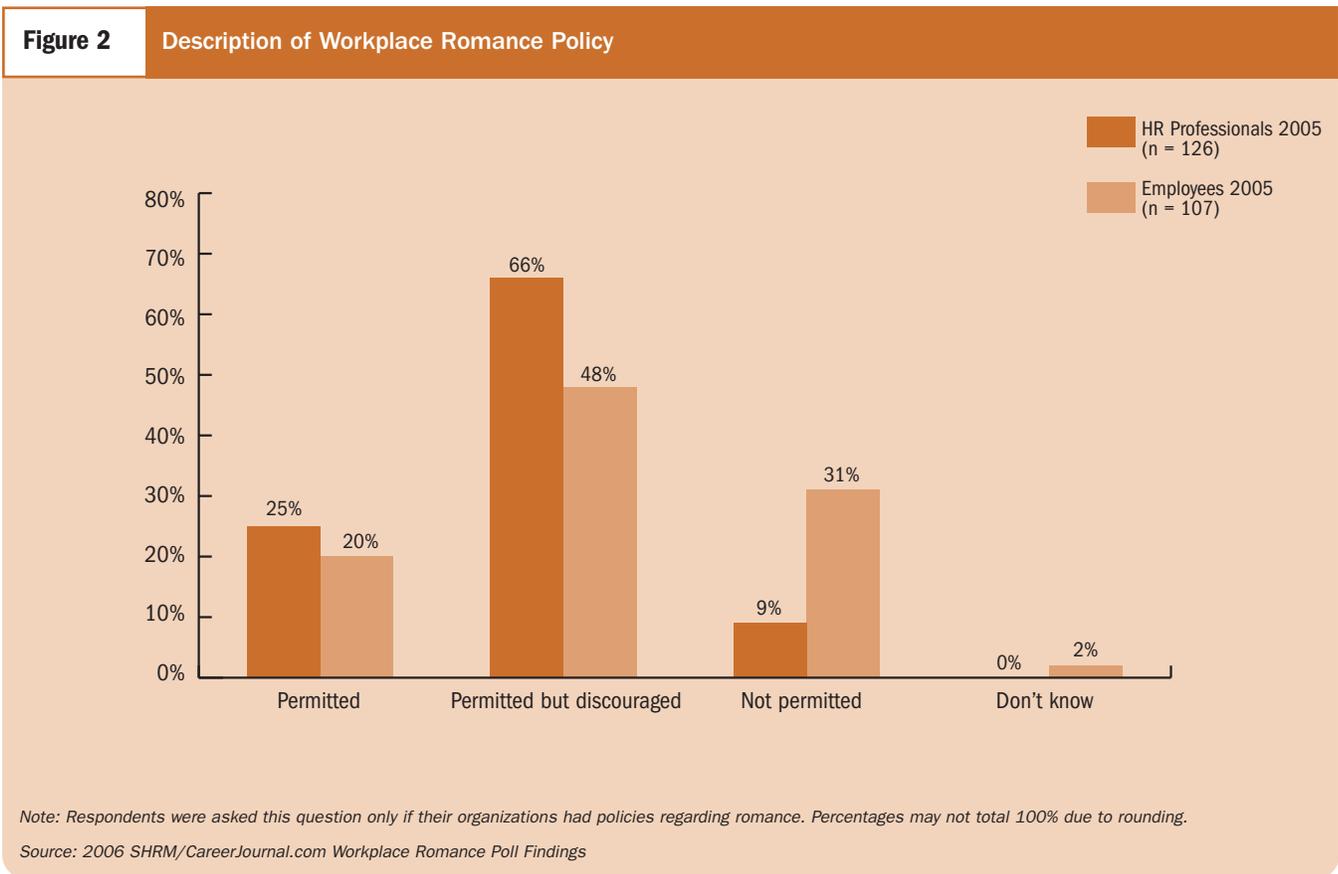


Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

Source: 2006 SHRM/CareerJournal.com Workplace Romance Poll Findings

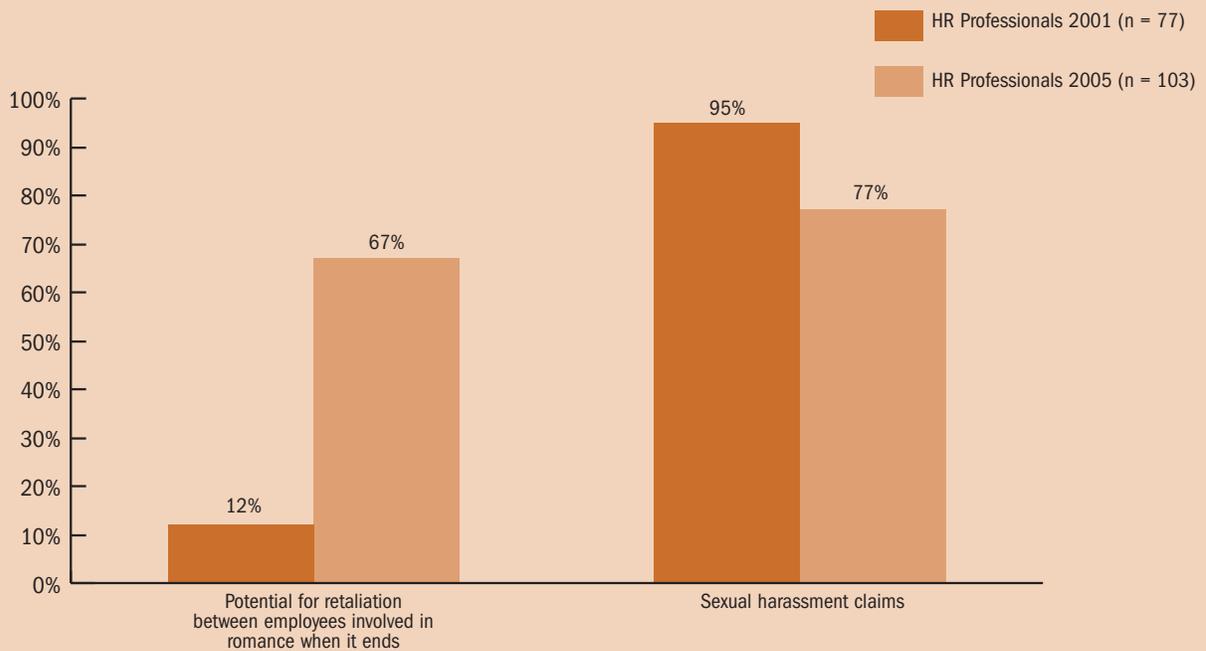
Similarly, attitudes about the acceptability of workplace romance have not changed. Of those organizations with office romance policies in place, few companies (9%) actually prohibited dating. Instead, the majority of HR respondents reported that company policies permitted dating but with some discouragement.

In contrast, a greater percentage of employees felt their companies' policies were in place to prevent romance (31% of employees compared with 9% of HR professionals). While these perceptions are remarkably different, this may be due to employees' interpretation of the organizations' office romance policies. If dating is permitted but openly discouraged in the workplace, employees might interpret the discouragement as a ban.



In the past four years, there was a large shift in why organizations have felt the need to discourage office romances. In 2001, 95% of HR professionals felt that fear of sexual harassment claims was reason to prohibit or discourage workplace romances. In 2005, 77% felt that way. Meanwhile, concerns about retaliation (conflicts between co-workers after a relationship ends) grew from 12% in 2001 to 67% in 2005.

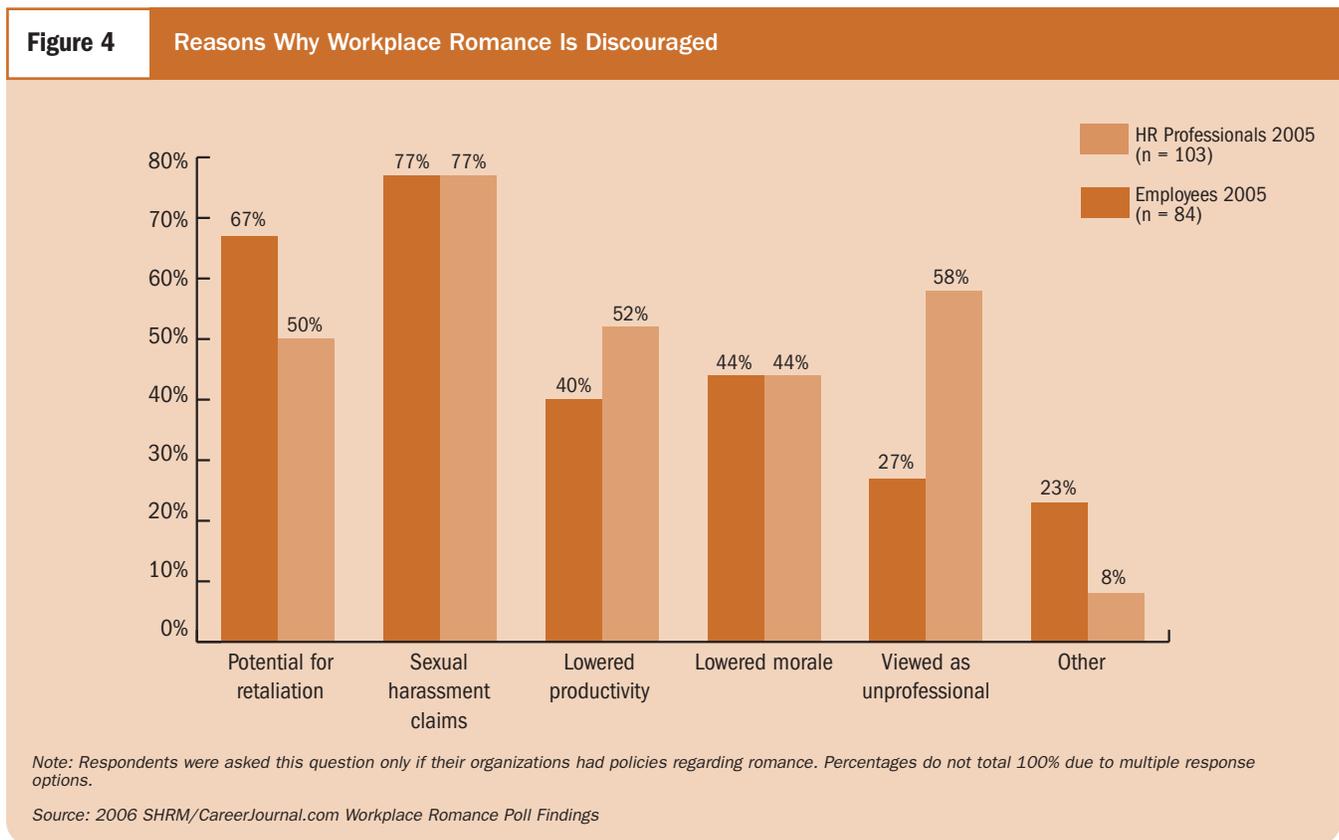
Figure 3 Change in Reasons Why Romances Are Not Permitted or Discouraged (HR Professionals)



Note: Percentages do not total 100% due to multiple response options.

Source: 2006 SHRM/CareerJournal.com Workplace Romance Poll Findings

Employees were very similar to HR professionals in terms of their reasons for organizations maintaining specific policies on office romance. Concerns about claims of sexual harassment and potential retaliation between employees were among the most prominent employee concerns. A notable difference between employees and HR professionals was the impression about the professionalism of a workplace romance. Only 27% of HR professionals felt this was a concern compared with 58% of employees. This is probably due to the fact that HR professionals are more concerned with the legality behind policies while employees are guided more by their personal views.



Restrictions

Table 1 illustrates the changes in restrictions placed on workplace romance from 2001 to 2005. Perceptions of HR professionals and employees were significantly different for all response options. Some of the differences between the two groups may be attributable to the fact that HR professionals are responsible for policies that are constructed with legal implications in mind.

Table 1 also compares the responses among HR professionals and employees from 2001 to 2005. Increasingly, HR professionals noted that romances should not occur between a supervisor and subordinate and that those involved should inform their supervisors of any relationship. In 2005 employees tended to feel less of a need for restrictions around office romances compared with 2001. Of the 13 restrictions listed, nine areas revealed a decline in employee expectations for restrictions.

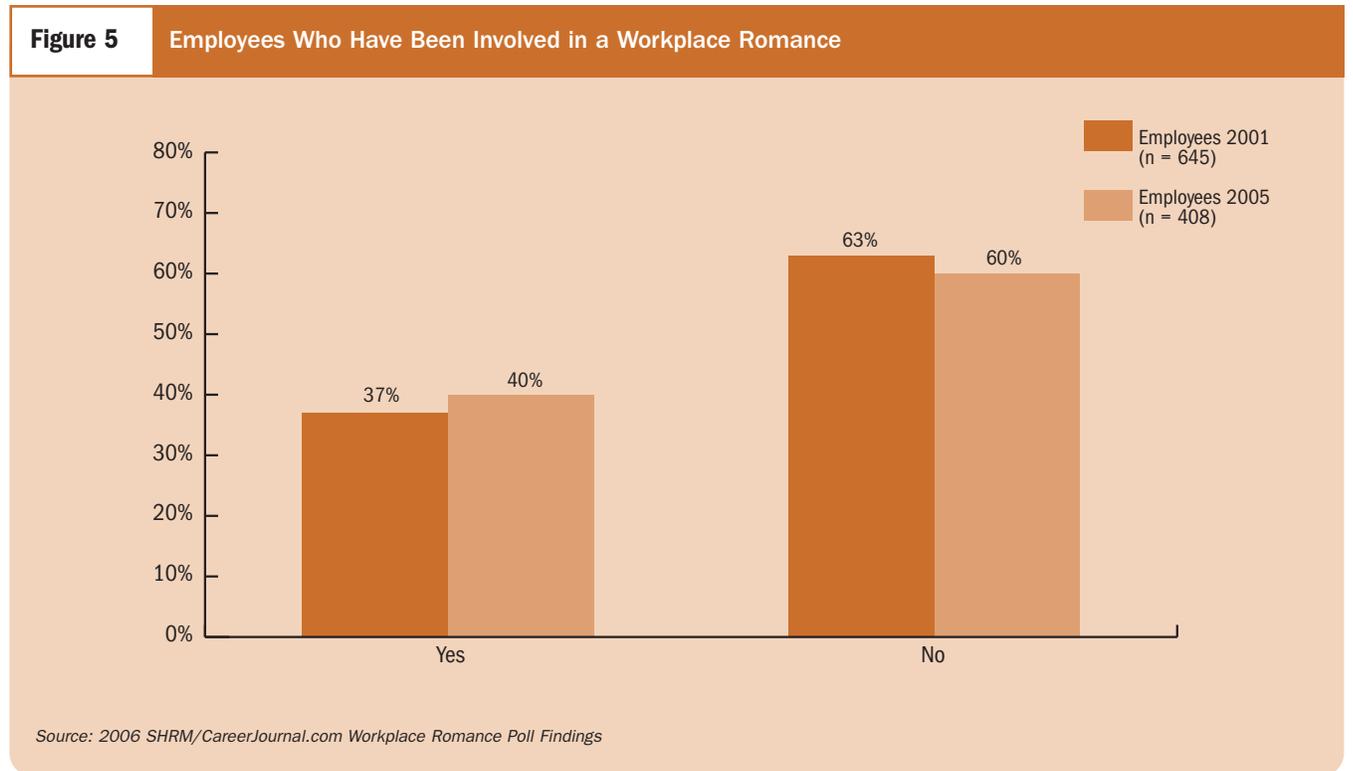
Table 1	Restrictions on Workplace Romance				Comparison of 2001 and 2005 Within Each Group of Respondents
	HR Professionals		Employees		
	2001 (n = 78)	2005 (n = 127)	2001 (n = 646)	2005 (n = 408)	
Romance is not/should not be between a supervisor and subordinate	64%	80%	70%	60%	HR ↑ Employees ↓
Those involved must inform their supervisors of the relationship	23%	39%	28%	29%	HR ↑
Public displays of affection are/should be prohibited	38%	35%	63%	54%	Employees ↓
Those involved may not be in the same department	31%	24%	49%	37%	Employees ↓
Romance cannot/should not be between employees of a significant rank difference	12%	16%	40%	26%	Employees ↓
Romance is not permitted between an employee and a client/customer	18%	13%	42%	31%	Employees ↓
Those involved in the romance may not report to the same supervisor	15%	13%	42%	31%	Employees ↓
Those involved in the romance may not work on the same projects	12%	6%	49%	34%	Employees ↓
There are no restrictions	14%	5%	21%	17%	HR ↓
Romance is not/should not be permitted at the organization	6%	4%	19%	14%	
Romance cannot/should not be between an employee and a competitor's employee	4%	4%	26%	16%	Employees ↓
Romance cannot/should not be between an employee and a vendor	6%	4%	32%	24%	Employees ↓
Other	15%	13%	5%	7%	

Note: Far more employees responded to this question than HR professionals; HR professionals were asked this question only if their organizations had policies regarding romance. Blank cells in the comparison column indicate that no statistically significant differences were found.

Source: 2006 SHRM/CareerJournal.com Workplace Romance Poll Findings

Employees Involved in a Workplace Romance

About 40% of employees reported being involved in a workplace romance at some point in their careers. This number has changed very little since 2001 (37%).



Consequences

The consequences deemed appropriate by HR professionals for workers who violate the workplace romance policy changed very little between 2001 and 2005. The only notable change was a decrease in the percentage of respondents who viewed a transfer as an appropriate consequence (from 55% in 2001 to 42% in 2005.) In contrast, employee opinions fluctuated much more since 2001. In 2005, employees felt more strongly that a formal reprimand was the appropriate consequence (52% compared with 8% in 2001).

Table 2 Consequences for Violating Policy on Workplace Romance

	HR Professionals		Employees		Comparison of 2001 and 2005 Within Each Group of Respondents
	2001 (n = 108)	2005 (n = 134)	2001 (n = 557)	2005 (n = 408)	
Transfer within the organization	55%	42%	53%	32%	HR ↓ Employees ↓
Formal reprimand	31%	36%	8%	52%	Employees ↑
Counseling	30%	34%	6%	14%	Employees ↑
Termination	35%	27%	33%	11%	Employees ↓
No official consequences	22%	19%	18%	13%	
Demotion	7%	7%	15%	2%	Employees ↓
Suspension	*	*	4%	6%	
Other	11%	18%	12%	12%	

Note: Far more employees responded to this question than HR professionals; HR professionals were asked this question only if their organizations had policies regarding romance. An asterisk () indicates that HR professionals were not given this response option. Blank cells in the comparison column indicate that no statistically significant differences were found.*

Source: 2006 SHRM/CareerJournal.com Workplace Romance Poll Findings

Outcomes

Between 2001 and 2005, HR professionals reported that instances of decreased productivity, sexual harassment and complaints of retaliation all declined. Employees also indicated declines in office romances that ended with a negative outcome. The largest change was the decrease in complaints of favoritism dropping from 52% in 2001 to 29% in 2005.

Table 3 Outcomes of Workplace Romances

	HR Professionals		Employees		Comparison of 2001 and 2005 Within Each Group of Respondents
	2001 (n = 468)	2005 (n = 472)	2001 (n = 646)	2005 (n = 407)	
Those involved got married	66%	62%	57%	42%	Employees ↓
Complaints of favoritism	46%	44%	52%	29%	Employees ↓
Divorce of married employees	32%	29%	34%	22%	Employees ↓
Decreased productivity by those involved	41%	26%	39%	23%	HR ↓ Employees ↓
Decreased morale of co-workers	24%	25%	25%	17%	Employees ↓
Claims of sexual harassment	26%	19%	31%	21%	HR ↓ Employees ↓
Complaints of stalking	19%	16%	19%	12%	Employees ↓
Complaints of retaliation	26%	15%	30%	15%	HR ↓ Employees ↓
Increased morale of co-workers	7%	6%	8%	7%	
Increased productivity by those involved	9%	5%	13%	7%	Employees ↓
Increase in workplace violence	4%	3%	7%	2%	Employees ↓
Other	10%	13%	6%	9%	Employees ↑

Note: Blank cells in the comparison column indicate that no statistically significant differences were found.

Source: 2006 SHRM/CareerJournal.com Workplace Romance Poll Findings

Steps to Be Taken When There Is a Workplace Romance

The majority of HR professionals (56%) felt that the best thing for an organization to do when it became aware of a workplace romance was to keep an eye on the situation. Other top responses for both groups were to look for problematic behavior and to talk to the employees involved.

Despite agreeing with HR professionals on the types of actions for companies to take, employees in 2005 also showed a desire for less company involvement when it learned of a romance compared to 2001.

Table 4 Steps to Be Taken When There Is a Workplace Romance

	HR Professionals		Employees		Comparison of 2001 and 2005 Within Each Group of Respondents
	2001 (n = 540)	2005 (n = 493)	2001 (n = 646)	2005 (n = 408)	
Keep an eye on the situation	57%	56%	*	*	
Look for problematic behavior	52%	44%	53%	42%	HR ↓ Employees ↓
Talk to employees involved	46%	39%	56%	44%	HR ↓ Employees ↓
Monitor conflict among co-workers	31%	31%	38%	30%	Employees ↓
Monitor productivity of workers	31%	29%	40%	31%	Employees ↓
Nothing	13%	15%	17%	14%	
Make employees sign a consensual agreement statement	12%	10%	12%	9%	
Monitor correspondence between suspected employees (i.e., e-mail)	4%	5%	7%	7%	
Support the relationship (e.g., allow common vacations)	11%	4%	12%	14%	
Other	9%	5%	6%	4%	

Note: An asterisk (*) indicates that employees were not given this response option. Blank cells in the comparison column indicate that no statistically significant differences were found.

Source: 2006 SHRM/CareerJournal.com Workplace Romance Poll Findings

Conclusions

Workplace romance can be an inevitable occurrence in the office environment. It comes as no surprise that when people work closely together romances may develop.

Organizational policies governing interoffice dating can be a touchy subject, and this might be the reason that most organizations do not have such policies. However, workplace romance is dropping the negative stigma that was associated with it in the past. Over the past four years, it appears that employees have become more open-minded about relationships between their colleagues. In fact, workplace romances can, in some cases, be helpful because the parties involved can be truly sympathetic to the concerns and anxieties of one another's work life.

Employees don't feel that strong consequences are needed for co-workers who get involved with one another. With an increased acceptance of office dating, employers don't need to institute punishments when there is no crime. However, if workers do violate an office policy, organizations still need to deal with the violators.

Despite the changed paradigm, organizations must continue to be careful about office romances. Office policies do not need to be invasive but still need to respect and protect the organization and its employees. Organizations must be careful to react assiduously to any problematic situations that arise. While romances have become more acceptable, HR professionals need to maintain their diligence in addressing any claims of sexual harassment or inappropriate office behavior.

Demographics

HR Professionals

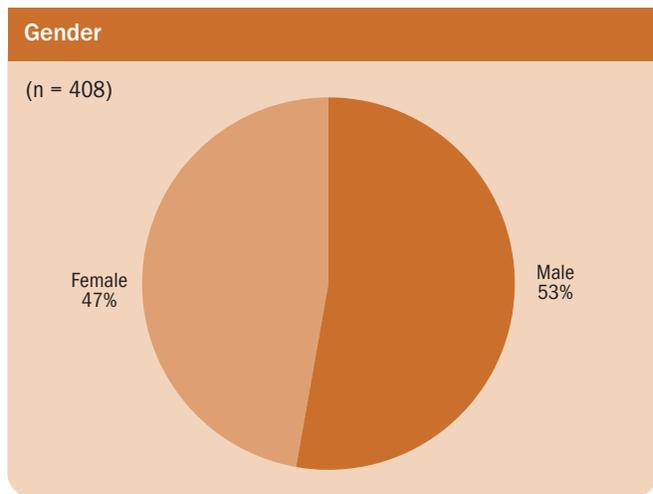
Organization Staff Size	
(n = 483)	
Small (1-99 employees)	24%
Medium (100-499 employees)	43%
Large (500 or more employees)	33%

Organization Sector	
(n = 491)	
Private for-profit organization	64%
Private nonprofit organization	18%
Public/government	15%
Other	4%

Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

Employees

Organization Staff Size	
(n = 322)	
Small (1-99 employees)	23%
Medium (100-499 employees)	22%
Large (500 or more employees)	55%



Age	
(n = 408)	
Under 20	2%
20-30	18%
31-40	30%
41-50	27%
51-60	21%
61+	2%

Poll Instruments

SHRM®/CareerJournal.com Workplace Romance Poll HR Professional Version

1a. Does your organization have a policy that addresses workplace romance?

- Yes, a written policy
- Yes, a verbal policy
- No written or verbal policy → go to question 4
- Don't know → go to question 3

1b. What best describes your organization's policy on workplace romances?

- Workplace romances are permitted
- Workplace romances are permitted but discouraged
- Workplace romances are not permitted
- Don't know → go to question 2

1c. Why are workplace romances discouraged or not permitted? (Check all that apply.)

- Potential for retaliation if the romance ends
- Potential for claims of sexual harassment
- Concerns about lowered productivity by those involved in the romance
- Concerns about lowered morale of co-workers of those involved in the romance
- Workplace romances are viewed as unprofessional
- Other (please specify): _____

2. Are there any restrictions imposed on workplace romance at your organization? (Check all that apply.)

- Workplace romances are not permitted at our organization
- No, there are no restrictions
- Romance is not permitted between a supervisor and subordinate
- Romance is not permitted between employees of a significant rank difference
- Romance is not permitted between an employee and a client/customer
- Romance is not permitted between an employee and an employee from a competitor

- Romance is not permitted between an employee and a vendor
- Those involved in the romance may not be in the same department
- Those involved in the romance may not work on the same projects
- Those involved in the romance may not report to the same supervisor
- Those involved in the romance must inform their supervisors of the relationship
- Public displays of affection are prohibited
- Other (please specify): _____

3. What consequences do employees who break your organization's policy on workplace romance face? (Check all that apply.)

- There are no official consequences
- A formal reprimand
- A transfer within the organization
- A demotion
- Termination
- Counseling
- Other (please specify): _____

4. In the past five years, have any of the following occurred at your organization as a result of a workplace romance between employees? (Check all that apply.)

- Complaints of retaliation when the romance ended
- Those involved in the romance got married
- Claims of sexual harassment
- Increased productivity by those involved in the romance
- Decreased productivity by those involved in the romance
- Complaints of favoritism from co-workers of those involved in the romance
- Complaints of stalking when the romance ended
- Increased morale of co-workers of those involved in the romance
- Decreased morale of co-workers of those involved in the romance
- Divorce of married employees
- Increase in workplace violence
- Other: _____

5. In your opinion, has the number of workplace romances at your organization increased, stayed the same or decreased in the past five years?

- Increased
- Stayed the same
- Decreased
- Don't know

6. In your opinion, should employers have the right to prohibit workplace romances between employees?

- Yes
- No
- Depends on the situation
- Don't know

7. In your opinion, what steps should an employer take once there is a hint about a workplace romance?**(Check all that apply.)**

- Monitor correspondence between suspected employees (i.e., e-mail)
- Monitor productivity of workers
- Keep an eye on the situation
- Monitor conflict among co-workers
- Talk to employees involved
- Look for problematic behavior
- Make employees sign a consensual agreement statement
- Support the relationship (e.g., allow common vacations)
- Nothing
- Other (please specify): _____

8. Are there employees married to each other at your organization?

- Yes
- No

Demographics**9. What is the total number of employees in the organization/office for which you are reporting?**

10. Which of the following best describes your organization?

- Private for-profit organization
- Private nonprofit organization
- Public/government
- Other (please specify): _____

**SHRM® /CareerJournal.com Workplace Romance Poll
Employee Version**

1a. Does your organization (or did your most recent organization) have a policy that addresses workplace romance?

- Yes, a written policy
- Yes, a verbal policy
- No written or verbal policy → go to question 2
- Don't know → go to question 2

1b. What best describes your organization's policy on workplace romances?

- Workplace romances are permitted
- Workplace romances are permitted but discouraged
- Workplace romances are not permitted
- Don't know

1c. Why are workplace romances discouraged or not permitted? (Check all that apply.)

- Potential for retaliation if the romance ends
- Potential for claims of sexual harassment
- Concerns about lowered productivity by those involved in the romance
- Concerns about lowered morale of co-workers of those involved in the romance
- Workplace romances are viewed as unprofessional
- Other (please specify): _____

2. What is your perception of workplace romance? (Check all that apply.)

- Workplace romances should not be not permitted at any organization
- There should not be any restrictions
- Romance should not occur between a supervisor and subordinate
- Romance should not occur between employees of a significant rank difference
- Romance should not occur between an employee and a client/customer
- Romance should not occur between an employee and an employee from a competitor
- Romance should not occur between an employee and a vendor
- Those involved in the romance should not be in the same department
- Those involved in the romance should not work on the same projects
- Those involved in the romance should not report to the same supervisor
- Those involved in the romance should inform their supervisors of the relationship
- Public displays of affection should be prohibited
- Other (please specify): _____

3. What consequences should an employee face if he or she breaks a policy regarding workplace romance? (Check all that apply.)

- There should be no consequences
- The employee should be given a formal reprimand
- There should be a transfer within the organization
- The employee should be demoted
- Employment should be terminated
- The employee should be required to attend counseling
- The employee should be suspended
- Other (please specify): _____

4. In the past five years, have you any knowledge of the following occurrences at your organization as a result of a workplace romance between employees? (Check all that apply.)

- Complaints of retaliation when the romance ended
- Those involved in the romance got married
- Claims of sexual harassment
- Increased productivity by those involved in the romance
- Decreased productivity by those involved in the romance
- Complaints of favoritism from co-workers of those involved in the romance
- Complaints of stalking when the romance ended
- Increased morale of co-workers of those involved in the romance
- Decreased morale of co-workers of those involved in the romance
- Divorce of married employees
- Increase in workplace violence
- Other: _____

5. In your opinion, has the number of workplace romances at your organization increased, stayed the same or decreased in the past five years?

- Increased
- Stayed the same
- Decreased
- Don't know

6. In your opinion, what means should an employer take once there is a suspicion about an interoffice romance? (Check all that apply.)

- Monitor correspondence between suspected employees (i.e., e-mail)
- Monitor productivity of workers
- Keep an eye on the situation
- Monitor conflict among co-workers
- Talk to employees involved
- Look for problematic behavior

- Make employees sign a consensual agreement statement
- Support the relationship (e.g., allow common vacations)
- Nothing
- Other (please specify): _____

7. Have you ever been negatively affected by a workplace romance (either from a relationship you were involved in or as a bystander)?

- Yes
- No

8a. Have you ever been involved in a workplace romance?

- Yes
- No → go to question 9

8b. Are you currently involved in a workplace romance?

- Yes
- No

9. In your opinion, should employers have the right to prohibit workplace romances between employees?

- Yes
- No

10. If employed, how many employees work at your organization?

11. Gender

- Female
- Male

12. In which age group do you fit?

- Under 20
- 20-30
- 31-40
- 41-50
- 51-60
- 61 and older

