

ROCHESTER

LIVING

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Arts

He's a blood-sucking bat, he's a boy, he just wants to be loved. *Shipping Dock Theatre* presents the cult musical *Bat Boy*.

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JAY CAPERS staff photographer
"There were fireworks" when Erron and Jeff Brooks met in 1997 at Livonia Pharmacy in Lakeville. They were married in 2003.

CAUTION: Love at work

Tact, restraint are among skills needed for successful on-the-job romance

LARI GITHENS HATCH
STAFF WRITER

The lawyer and the secretary, both single, agreed to keep it private around the office.

No meaningful glances. No lunches. No quick kisses in a stairwell. Keep it on the down low.

Until a co-worker spotted them out running one weekend and told the boss.

"I put two and two together, I called him in and I said, 'Is this true?' and he said 'yes' and they kept it discreet and it was fine," recalls Gerald Dibble, a partner at Dibble, Miller and Burger PC, a Rochester law firm.

"Look, you can't stop love. I should know," continues Dibble, who married his junior high school sweetheart, 38 years ago. "Whether it's emotional or

chemical, you can't stop it." Around the office, fewer of us are bothering to try.

With bills to pay, retirements to fund and workdays stretching ever longer, Americans seem less inclined, and less able, to look for love in bars, churches and gyms.

Instead, they're searching in Cubi-Ville, regarding co-workers as potential partners in life, not just at work.

"People work longer hours today, which creates fewer opportunities to meet others outside of the office," says Leemor Amado, a consultant with the American Management Association, a management education firm based in New York City.

"So, it's no surprise that budding romances blossom among those with whom we spend the most time."

Once frowned upon, often for good reason (see also: *The*

Apartment, *Working Girl*, *Jungle Fever*, *Bridge of Sighs* and Bill Clinton's presidency), office liaisons have become more accepted and prevalent. In a 1994 survey the American Management Association did for *Money* magazine, only 24 percent of respondents had dated a co-worker; 38 percent said it ended in marriage; 74 percent said it was OK to date a co-worker and 23 percent approved of dating the boss.

Compare that with a survey of more than 390 managers and executives conducted last year by the same organization. It found that:

- 30 percent said they had dated a co-worker.
- Of those, 44 percent got married.
- Two-thirds said they approved of employees dating in the workplace. Of those who approve, 96 percent said it was

OK to date co-workers; and 24 percent said it was OK for employees to date their bosses. Given its increased acceptance, what's the lure of fishing off the company pier?

Expediency, for one thing. What better way to meet someone who, for starters, you know actually has a job? Beyond that, what better way to see how they handle pressure, authority, awkward corporate picnics and liquor-soaked holiday parties? Corinna O'Brien LaManna met Andrew LaManna shortly after she began an internship at Paychex in 1997.

They dated briefly, then split amicably when he became anxious that their relationship might distract them from their careers. But 18 months later, more secure at their jobs — his in

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client benefits, hers in employee development — they resumed dating. Eighteen months after that, they got engaged.

As they mark their first wedding anniversary this month, Corinna praises interoffice dating for its ability to reveal a person's true nature.

"On a profound level, you get to see who they really are, day after day," Corinna explains. "I found it very attractive how effective he was at his job."

Andrew agrees that daily interaction helped him see — and fall for — the real Corinna.

People encountered outside of work "don't necessarily tell you everything when you first meet," he says. "You see them kind of at a distance for a while. This just speeds things up."

When a relationship is cooking, there's no matching the energy and enthusiasm both parties bring to the job.

In 1997, Erron Lyn Penrod of Honeoye, Ontario County, found herself increasingly eager to get to her job as a pharmacy assistant at the Livonia Pharmacy in Lakeville, Livingston County. Especially once Jeff Brooks, of Wayland, Steuben County, began stopping by to see his mother, the owner.

"There were fireworks," she says of her attraction to him. By 2000, Jeff had become the pharmacy's accountant and a co-owner — and Erron's new man, even though her friends tried to talk her out of the relationship.

"They said, 'Don't do it, it'll be too much togetherness, if it doesn't work out you'll want to kill each other,' all of that," she recalls. "So, of course, I didn't listen."

Wisely, it turned out. In November 2003, she became Erron L.P. Brooks.

However sweet these stories, though, both situations could have become legal nightmares, experts say.

"Any time you're dealing with issues in the workplace and romantic involvement, you've got to be sensitive to the law," says Nelson Thomas, a partner at Dolin, Thomas and Solomon, LLP, employment law specialists.

So what are the rules?

Federal employment law says workers can engage in relationships "as long as it's consensual between the parties, and you don't condition a person's employment on having that relationship," explains Thomas.

Had Erron and Jeff broken up, for example, and Erron wanted revenge, "(she) could claim it was an unwelcome relationship, which is a hard case to defend," says Thomas, referring to the task Jeff might have faced.

Flipped around, had Jeff become unhappy and vengeful after breaking up, or insistent that Erron keep seeing him, "then (the relationship) can look unwelcome and it appears you're making the job conditioned on the continuation of the relationship," the lawyer adds.

Even if peers are dating and split up, litigation can still loom because one party can always claim sexual harassment.

And even when the relation-

Three arguments in favor of dating at work:

- 1 You know they have a job, what it is and maybe even their salary. They know this about you. In the real world, this could take years to discern.
- 2 You see each other in all weathers and situations, not just prettied up on dates. This could also take years to see.
- 3 As long as things are going well, going to work totally rocks.

Three arguments against dating at work:

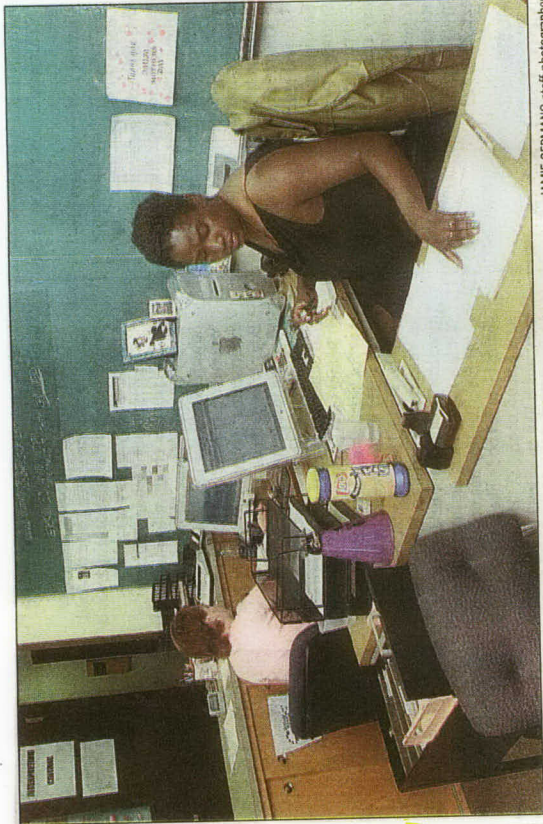
- 1 Work stops being a refuge during those bad-hair, bad-mood and bad-relationship days.
- 2 Inevitably, you will try to sneak a stairwell moment.
- 3 And inevitably, you will be caught.

If you break up, your workdays take their rightful place on Dante's Ninth Circle of Hell.

Love in an elevator — and elsewhere

Given the long hours people work, it's no surprise how many people strike up office romances. But how often, with whom and where is pretty interesting, according to the results of The Vault 2001 Office Romance Survey.

- Percent of workers who've had an office tryst: 38.8
- Percent who've been caught: 11.3
- The most popular places for those trysts: Desk (39.4 percent), conference room (35.2 percent), boss' office (18.3 percent), restroom (16.9 percent).
- Industries with the highest rates of office romance: Media/entertainment, advertising/marketing, consulting, law.
- What employees find most unacceptable: Manager dating subordinate, 52 percent; employee dating boss, 47 percent; employee dating upper management, 32.9 percent; employee dating intern, 30.5 percent
- What employers find most unacceptable: Manager dating subordinate, 64.1 percent; employee dating intern, 32.7 percent; employee dating upper management; 28.8 percent same-sex dating, 25.5 percent.
- Have you dated a subordinate? Yes, 27.6 percent; no, but willing to, 23 percent; no, 49.4 percent.



JAMIE GERMANO staff photographer
Shaunti Session says her job at RIT is a sanctuary, and she refuses to date people she works with.

ship is going well, experts say, companies still need to think about its potential effects on the bottom line.

"If the couple leaves, will that wipe you out? Can the two people involved hurt your business? Does it affect the others around them?" Dibble asks. "These can all be serious problems." The endless complications are why Shaunti Session refuses to ever date anyone from work.

Her job is a sanctuary for her, explains Session, a scheduler for the department of interpreting services at the Rochester Institute of Technology. "My motto is, leave your baggage at the door and focus on work. If I have people in my personal business, or my personal business is here, I can't do that."

And while some feel it's a plus to see how a colleague behaves in business attire from nine to five, Session takes the opposite view.

"You don't know how they are outside of work," she cautions. "They could be a real jelly-and-Hyde kind of person, and how would you know?"

Accordingly, some of Rochester's larger employers have firm rules about inter-office romances, while others prefer to simply inform employees of potential complications.

■ At Paychex, which employs roughly 900 people, spokeswoman Laura Saxby Lynch says the company has no "regulations relative to dating," and declines to discuss hypothetical situations.

is a sales analyst and her in-laws are their bosses.

The two knew each other casually in high school but began dating after she began working part-time at SPS over college breaks. They married in 2003.

Now the marketing manager, she works down the hall from her husband.

In general, she says, "it's perfect for us," but it can be awkward, too.

"Obviously, if you're fighting and really heated about it, it's not the best thing to have to come to work," she offers candidly.

"The No. 1 key is, when 5 o'clock hits, you're the daughter-in-law and wife, and not until 8 a.m. are you the co-worker. You just try not to cross the lines."

Now that Jeff Brooks is his wife's boss, "it's a strange dynamic at work, to be sure," he laughs.

While "completely happy and in love," he says, they don't get to miss each other as much as they might if they worked apart.

And, he says, they don't have the distraction of hearing the daily soap opera of a spouse's job.

"I wouldn't say to someone 'don't do it' but I would say 'think hard about it,'" says Brooks.

"We're happy. But we got lucky." □

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Wegmans spokeswoman Katie Crane notes that with

about 15,000 local workers, in-house romance is inevitable. "We certainly don't frown on it, because we try to be family-friendly," she says. But here, too, relationships between supervisors and subordinates may lead to a job switch for one.

■ The policy for Kodak's roughly 20,000 local workers is similar: Co-worker dating is seen as inevitable and thus permitted. But manager and staffer relationships may result in one person having to switch work assignments or departments.

All legal issues aside, working and sleeping together may create more personal problems than it solves:

■ It can lead to too much familiarity.

■ It strips both people of having work as a refuge from tensions at home.

■ It can blur the lines between work and home roles.

"It's both pleasurable and a challenge," says Jackie Nale Hughes, a marketing manager for SPS Medical Supply in Henrietta, where her husband, John,