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Family Ties

By DEBBIE KELLEY THE GAZETTE

A few years ago, Mike and Mary Livingston, a married couple who work as engineers at Atmel Corp. in Colorado Springs, competed for the same promotion.

He got the job. She didn't.

Friends asked Mary if she was jealous of her husband.

"I maintained the same level of professionalism I have had since we started working together. So I said, 'His money is my money, too. And I think he deserved the job,'" she said.

Besides, Mike now reasons, "The job wouldn't have been a good fit for her."

The Livingstons are one of 10 million couples in the nation who have found that business and pleasure can mix, according to Dennis Powers, a businesslaw professor at Southern Oregon University.

Nationwide surveys by Vault, a career and employment manager, and the American Management Association showed nearly half of employees had dated colleagues, and about half of those relationships led to marriage or long-term relationships.

Such a union can be simultaneously challenging and beneficial for employers and employees.

"There are couples who work well together and others who make the ups and downs of their relationship known to everyone, which leads to morale and performance issues," said Kim Koy, director of Mountain States Employers Council's regional office in Colorado Springs. The nonprofit association assists employers with human resources, employment law and management training.

The key to making the workplace marriage work, as the Livingstons have discovered, can be summarized in a single word: professionalism.

"If the employees are handling themselves professionally and appropriately, it's not an issue," Koy said. "When the workplace becomes the realm of the romance, studies show that productivity can decline 14 to 20 percent as a result of gossiping and lost work time."

STATE PROTECTS COUPLES

Despite the potential for emotional dramas, public displays of affection and possible breakup turmoil, employers cannot prohibit spouses or partners from working for the same company.

Marital status is protected under Colorado law, said Koy, who also is an attorney, although there are some exceptions, including "conflict of interest." This enables an employer to prevent direct

supervisor-subordinate relationships between spouses or dating couples.

Another state statute regarding “lawful activities” keeps employers from forbidding co-workers to date.

To avoid problems, companies need policies that address the topic, as well as conduct on the job and productivity, Koy said.

Policies vary by company, and employers generally say they welcome couples in the workplace.

Defense contractor Lockheed Martin Corp.’s Integrated Systems and Solutions unit in the Springs does not allow family members to work in the same chain of command, but relatives, including spouses, can work on the same project.

The only restriction at USAA Insurance is that couples cannot supervise each other, said regional spokesman John Henry.

“We see it as a positive thing that couples want to work at USAA,” Henry said. “We’re a pro-family company.”

Intel Corp. also restricts direct supervision and does not allow couples to have influence over job reviews. “We have lots of married couples working here, so it’s obviously something that’s working out for us,” said spokeswoman Judy Cara.

Not letting married couples work for the same supervisor places necessary space between the couple, said Jeff Murphy, Atmel’s manufacturing manager who oversees about 850 employees who produce semiconductors.

“Our goal is that the couple doesn’t work in the same vicinity,” he said. “The bottom line is people need to focus at work. When you go home we want you to not worry about work. At work, we want you to not worry about issues at home.”

The preventive measure works well, Murphy said, and decreases gossip, one of the main drawbacks of having couples in the workplace.

“If we didn’t allow couples to work here, then we could potentially lose some very good employees,” he said.

MORALE AND LOYALTY INCREASE

Although being related is not a bar to employment, it can create a “perception of impropriety,” which employers should be wary of, said Donald Klingner, Ph.D., a professor in the Graduate School of Public Affairs at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs.

“Even if there’s no favoritism or conflict of interest, people will look for it, so employers need to ensure there is neither,” said Klingner, who specializes in personnel management. “There’s a

legal need to balance employment rights with the need to treat people equitably.”

Jauna Werner, an implementation specialist at Intel Corp., has noticed the need to walk a fine line.

“My husband and I tend to avoid working on the same projects because there might be a perception that some of my decisions are being clouded by my husband’s input, or vice versa,” she said. Jauna and husband Scott, a process engineering group leader, both have worked at Intel for the past five years.

Colorado Springs is a ripe market for spouses as co-workers because many job seekers relocate to the area as couples, Klingner said.

“We’re a medium-size community and growing quickly, but we don’t have the diversity of employers, particularly in professional fields,” he said.

Plus, there are advantages to having married or dating couples in the workplace. Koy cites improved communications, collaboration and morale.

Murphy said couples tend to be loyal to the company, “and that helps create more of a family environment.”

For the Livingstons and the Werners, working for the same employer means they can car pool to work and eat lunch together every day.

“It’s not exactly quality time, but it’s time we have together, and it’s more than a lot of couples,” Mike Livingston said.

Another asset, Jauna Werner said, is that she and her husband can bounce ideas off each other, and look to one another for expertise and opinions.

“You know you’ll get unfiltered feedback,” she said. “We both consider it a huge asset to work at the same company, but it is a little weird at times, such as when we’re in the same meeting together interfacing professionally. We get some good-natured ribbing from our colleagues.”

A pitfall for Mike Livingston is that sometimes his wife’s friends at work seem to know more about him than he’d like, which he said can be a little uncomfortable.

And work also has the potential to become a dominant topic at home, which Jauna Werner said she and her husband try to avoid.

“Sometimes I have to stop and ask if he’s just complaining about his day or if we’re having a formal conversation and he expects me to follow up on an issue,” she said.

Job security also has become a concern for the Livingstons with the recent downturns in the high-tech industry and both working in the same field.

But overall, Mary Livingston said, “When we’ve contemplated one of us moving to a different company, the possible benefits don’t outweigh the advantages we have now.”

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ADVICE FOR EMPLOYERS

Be proactive by having a policy that addresses married and dating couples working at the company.

Expect that spouses will want the same days off.

Watch for employees complaining about others getting privileges, increased gossip or decreased productivity.

Do not ignore the situation, especially if a couple’s actions are affecting performance.

Handle problems like any other performance issue, by communicating, being open about expectations and taking corrective action, if necessary.

Consider moving disruptive spouses to a different shift or supervisor.

If the couple breaks up, be aware of possible sexual harassment claims or restraining orders.

SOURCE: Gazette