

**FloridaToday.com**  
**February 07, 2007**  
**By Scott Blake**

## **Experts say office romance risky, rewarding Firms advised to look ahead, put rules in place**

Monday's arrest of NASA astronaut Lisa Nowak in Orlando is among the highest-profile recent cases of what is believed to be a romantic workplace relationship gone awry.

With people spending much of their time on the job, romantic relationships at the workplace are fairly common.

Nearly two-thirds of workers said they have a crush on a co-worker, according to a recent survey by job search Web site SnagAJob.com.

"Office crushes are most often harmless distractions, but can get complicated, should they lead to workplace romances," said Shawn Boyer, chief executive officer at SnagAJob.com.

Still, that doesn't stop a lot of people.

Almost half of American workers have been romantically tied to someone from work, according to a 2001 study by Vault.com, a Web site that provides career information.

Nowak, 43, is charged with attacking and attempting to kidnap and kill a woman she perceived as a rival for the attention of a male astronaut.

However, workplace romances can be good for people. Many meet their future husbands and wives on the job. But it also comes with some risks, said Dr. Andrea Deratany, a psychologist in Indialantic who practice includes counseling couples.

"When people work together, especially on the same project, they are likely to develop feelings of admiration for the people they work with, and that has the potential for developing into something stronger than admiration, which is romantic love," Deratany said.

In addition, when two people in a relationship work together, "they have proximity to each other. They can spend their lunch hour together. At least they can see each other. They also probably have a lot in common, since they're doing the same kind of work and understand each other," Deratany said.

But there are potential drawbacks, she said.

"It can cause resentment among colleagues, especially if it results in favoritism or exclusionary behavior," Deratany said. "It can lower productivity" by the people who are dating, "causing resentment in colleagues, especially if they have to pick up the slack."

And, when people from work date and break up, it can lead to other complications, especially if the breakup was not a mutual decision, she said.

It can get to the point where a romantic workplace relationship -- especially one turned sour -- can tarnish someone's professional reputation, and even jeopardize his or her job or career, she added.

## **Experts say office romance risky, rewarding Firms advised to look ahead, put rules in place cont.**

According to Deratany, it is even riskier when an employee initiates a romantic relationship with a subordinate.

“It can lower morale among others in the office,” she said. “Superiors should be very cautious about initiating that type of a relationship. Any time someone is in a position of authority, they have inherent power and they are more responsible about what happens in the development in a relationship.”

Every large company should have rules about employees dating, and many companies do have rules against superiors dating subordinates, said Melbourne attorney Maurice Arcadier who specializes in employment and labor law.

That’s because discrimination and sexual harassment laws generally apply to businesses with 15 or more employees, he said.

Employees should know what is and is not appropriate regarding romance at work, and companies should make that clear to employees, said Bob Kustka, a former human-resources director for the Gillette Co. and president of Fusion Factor, a workplace productivity consulting firm in Norwell, Mass.

“When you think about how much time a person spends at work, it is unrealistic to expect all employees to abstain from dating,” said Kustka, who met his wife on the job. “But there are appropriate and inappropriate ways to pursue a relationship. It is up to the management team and (human-resources) department to take a stand, and decide what the company will and will not allow when it comes to office romance.”

Establishing policies or restrictions on workplace dating can benefit employers, because romantic relationships among workers can hinder productivity, Kustka said.

It also can lead to sexual harassment complaints or litigation when once acceptable behavior in the office between two people in a relationship is construed as harassment by one of them after a breakup, he said.

When dating someone from work, Kustka said it is a good policy not to let that relationship come into play during work hours.

“It is appropriate to go out to lunch together,” he added. “But they should avoid discussing their relationship with others in the office.”