Trends of Human Resources Management Through Understanding Office Romances in the Hospitality Industry of Northern Cyprus

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I. Introduction

Current work place practices associated with 24 hours service within the hospitality industry: longer shifts and overnight shifts are creating an ideal social venue for employees to interact and thus develop office romances. The hospitality industry is no exception and thus a growing and new social phenomenon is being created not only in Northern Cyprus but worldwide. Human Resource managers must become aware of this and the associated consequences. Specific awareness must be established in order to keep the equilibrium of the workplace and more importantly not to misplace or disrupt the enthusiasm of the employees. Many internationally recognized companies the like of: IBM, Staples, AT&T, Corning & Xerox have historically tried unsuccessfully to restrict employee relationships or any such activities that were viewed ‘harmful’ to the company. These policies having been proved ineffective have subsequently been dropped (Hyomowitz and Pollock, 1998). Consequently, the main purpose of this study is to develop concepts to describe, conceptualize and analyse the phenomena of ‘Office Romances’ drawing from international experience. Additionally, using the point of view of HRM and staff interviewed to provide a practical insight using the case of the hospitality industry of Northern Cyprus. In this study existing concepts and theoretical models describing the topic of ‘Office Romances’ will also be explored and brought into the specific context. In particular, the study seeks to explore and investigate the following hypotheses:

H.1. Currently there are no, or a relatively insignificant number of, organizations in Northern Cyprus in the field of Hotel Management that have HR policy covering ‘Office Romances’ policy.

H.2. The Human Resource managers have no real power to proceed and control/limit the cases of ‘Office Romances’.

H.3. There is a direct connection between age groups towards perception of Office Romances in the ‘control group’ hotels.

H.4. It is argued that for some reason, male respondents were in favour of ‘Office Romances’; while their female counterparts were less favourable.

Abstract: This is the first study conducted examining the number of office romances among employees and the policies of the HRM Departments of 5 star hotels surveyed in Northern Cyprus. The study sets out to investigate and analyze the number of ‘office romances’ in the sample hotel establishments by assessing the number of ‘romances’ and then comparing the statistics with worldwide figures available. Finally, assessing the HRM policies in place like Northern Cyprus. Detailed and in depth fieldwork research was carried out using 160 employees from various service departments within the 5-star hotels. Further in depth interview techniques were used with Human Resources department managers to assess the policy and approach of each hotel towards staff relationships. The researcher made a point of stressing the need for HR policies and in particular with regard to office relationships within the sample studies. The study has led to the conclusion that HR managers in the sample study from the 5 star hotels of Northern Cyprus have a different perception to office ‘romances’ than is internationally recognized. Additionally, findings indicate that most HR managers within the hospitality industry in Northern Cyprus have no desire to interfere in what they feel is the line managers responsibility. Such cases being viewed as a ‘personal dispute’ or a ‘private matter’.

Keywords: Office romances, Human Resource Management, workplace romance policies, hospitality, hotel management, Northern Cyprus
II. Context of Office Romances

An Office Romance is a consensual relationship between two members of the same organization that entails mutual sexual attraction (Meuniere, 1986; Pierce and Aguinis, 2009; Powell & Foley, 1998). In addition, the definition includes dating or marital relationships that develop before or during employment (Moen and Sweet, 2002; Werbel and Hames, 1996). The key defining attributes of Office Romances are that, unlike sexually harassing behaviour (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission EEOC, 1993), they are consensual and mutually welcomed relationships (Amaral, 2006; Clarke, 2006). According to Wikipedia, Office Romance exists when two members of the same organization develop a relationship with mutual attraction (Wikipedia, 2012). It is estimated that nearly 10 million workplace romances develop annually in the U.S. (Spragins, 2004) and moreover, there is no consensus regarding best managerial practices (Lickey et al., 2009). Thanks to the Internet, office romances are no longer taboo. ‘They are expected’. Why the change, when workplace pairings were off-limits? “Most people work and since, that is where they spend most of their time and energy, it makes sense that is where they will meet other attractive singles” (Moran, 2011:2). The challenge is that companies need to protect themselves from the negative consequences of Office Romance (including harm resulting to individuals who don’t work directly for the company); while maintaining a positive workplace environment for all employees (Schwartz and Storm, 2000).

III. Methodology

The research attempts to gain a deeper understanding of the concept of Office Romances in the hotel sector and its possible implication for employees and management in Northern Cyprus. Based on the interview questions and questionnaires developed, both qualitative research – case study and quantitative portion of the study were employed by the researcher. The method used by the researcher is to markedly demonstrate the potential of Human Resource Management issues associated with Office Romances in the hospitality industry by the following approach:

1. Conduct in-depth interviews with the HR department managers;
2. Distribute questionnaires and pilot a preliminary survey among employees.
3. Provide case studies as guidelines to define through a) the strategic framework of the research, and b) contribute to the continuous improvement and development of a tourism destination.

The sample size consisted of 160 questionnaires specifically designed for the survey of staff employed by the private organizations who had agreed to participate from the hospitality industry in Northern Cyprus. The initial data for the study required replies from a total of 160 respondents plus 4 HR professionals. While the exact figure of respondents decreased, nevertheless it provided initial preliminary attitudes of HR professionals and staff towards Office Romances. The questionnaire was formatted in three parts of ‘closed’ and ‘open ended’ questions thus allowing the participants an ‘option’ for their answers. The questionnaire design was partly taken and adopted as a sample from SHRM studies 2011. For the purpose of this study, semi-structured ‘face to face’ interviews were conducted. These interviews involved the HRM of the focus group and were originally completed in Turkish language with audio recordings by the researcher.

IV. Analysis

A. Analysis of the Interview Results

In general, HRM’s attitudes towards Office Romances were similar as they were represented by a group of (n = 4). Participants, however, provided varied opinions. Thus, in order to classify their responses the following analysis is presented under four main headings. Each heading should enable the understanding of the policies role of HRM together with the participant’s attitudes.

A.1. Office Romance Policies

Discussing the subject of having a formal company policy (written or verbal) that addresses Office Romance by-the organizations. All four HR managers provided almost similar explanations of ‘insignificant attention’ from their departments towards Office Romances. The majority of the HRM respondents indicated that they preferred oral ‘cautions’, if necessary to employees. These ‘oral’ cautions would thus avoid negativity in the workplace. The similarities in these responses indicate that the HRM’s decision on whether to discipline or not depends upon the behavior of the personnel conducting the Office Romance and if the HRM or line manager considers the conduct ‘provocative’, not by the actions alone, but, rather by the context and circumstances that surrounded the actions. An overwhelming proportion of HRM’s generalized their response by relying on the existing/non-existent rules & regulations of the company.

A.2. Responsibility Concern

By broadening the question on the role of HRM’s to examine their competence and responsibility in regard to Office Romances. All HRM’s agreed that the specific department of the employee concerned should initially...
investigate the matter. If the department manager could not resolve the issue it was generally agreed that the HRM should decide what action to take. Only 1 of 4 of the HRM’s felt that it was the role of the HRM to intervene in the matter, thus avoiding conflict in the workplace.

### A.3. Age in Perception of Office Romances

Respondents were asked to link the age groups: give their general attitude and perception towards Office Romances. The answers given indicated a direct link between age and perception of Office Romances. The majority of the interviewees claimed that the most active age group is people between 20 & 30 years old. Respondents were then asked how they viewed these particular Romances between young people. Two thirds felt that youth and inexperience lead to these liaisons, and as such the HRM’s felt it unnecessary to take action; under normal circumstances.

### A.4. Gender Effects

According to the HR managers, male respondents are more favorably disposed towards Office Romances compared to their female counterparts. However, researcher have addressed some of the questions with data from recent cases, where: Half of the respondents agreed that male employees may be in favor of relationships but that they only wanted ‘trouble free’ and ‘without involvement’ relationships.

### B. Analysis of the Questionnaire Results

In this section the researcher tries to review the study of the effects of Office Romances under the following headings: the role of HRM policies in a specific organization by piloting a questionnaire survey to ascertain - sex & gender; general perception of Office Romances; professional & unprofessional concerns; consequences of such romances; and evaluation relating to job performance and job satisfaction. These questions analyzed in the classified order. The dynamics reported in this research presumably applies to the broadest group of employees (n = 128). To simplify the procedure, the researcher indicated two key mainstream groups:

- (a) Romance should not happen in the workplace under any condition. The consideration being that it is an unethical and unacceptable manner of behaving (n = 105);
- (b) Office Romances were considered a ‘personal’ matter which did not concern anyone except the participants (n = 23). Surprisingly, this second group of participants either has been involved or is still involved in such relationships within the workplace. The first group (a) generally reflects the most straightforward resolution to the problems created by these relationships. However to ‘blanket ban’ such liaisons is totally unmanageable and impractical within an organizational structure. The ramifications involved in legislating for such a ban would be numerous as employees could become negative thus affecting productivity and the general working environment, with additional complaints of possible discrimination or favoritism, etc. One or two disgruntled members of staff can wreak havoc upon a once pleasant working situation. The second, more liberal group, (b) has reflected the opposite opinion: considering it the main concern of the employees not the employer. The result of the current study demonstrates that respondents who have past experience of Office Romance are most likely to express tolerance and have a positive approach to such romances. While the less tolerant respondents either have failed relationships in the past or quite simply do not condone such behavior in the workplace.

#### B.1. Building on existing data

This section focuses on how employees respond to Office Romances. Thus providing key indicators which strengthen and reinforce the notion that company policy needs to be in place to create better awareness of Office Romance and how to address the problem with organizational policy and procedure. The participants of the survey also highlighted significant variability in the contexts and circumstances that they used to qualify their attitudes towards workplace romances. In order to summarize the findings, the researchers created three categories:

- **i) Management Frame: Policy Addressing Office Romances**
  43.8% of the employees confirmed their knowledge of company policy with regard to written or oral ‘warnings’ regarding Office Romances. 22.7% reported no awareness of company policy regarding written or verbal ‘warnings’ within the workplace. While 33.6% did not know if the company had any policy regarding Office Romance. It is assumed therefore that the majority of employees are not familiar with company policy. Overall, 36.7% of the workers admitted that Office Romances are not permitted. Addressing the issue that best describes organizational policy regarding Office Romances: 10.9% out of 100% reported that Office Romances are permitted: while 16.4% considered Office Romances were permitted but discouraged by management. An additional aspect highlighted by the respondents: 40.6% of respondents felt that the company should have a policy prohibiting/limiting Office Romance; while 59.4% felt there should be no prohibition.

- **ii) Perception Frame: Consequence and Reflection**
  21.1% of the respondents (n=27) agreed that Office Romances should not be permitted within any organization. 19.5% consider that there should not be any restrictions (n=25). It is important to note that our respondents relied
heavily on their personal perception of their last 12 months work experience when determining whether Office Romance was problematical. Another interesting finding is that 35.9% of the respondents believe there should not be ‘consequences’ if an employee breaks company policy regarding Office Romance. 14.8% think the employees should be given a formal written notice, while 10.9% consider the employment should be terminated. The foregoing indicates that employees are not concerned about advancing their careers. They are careless regarding company policy on Office Romances even when it is in place to protect them from future litigation.

iii) Contemporary Frame: Current Replication

Interesting to note: 21.1% of the respondents reported that those employees who dated or who were involved romantically which resulted in marriage. 8.6% showed decreased productivity; while a further 8.6% noted complaints of ‘favoritism’ from co-workers regarding the employees who were romantically involved. 14.8% or (n=19) of the respondents complained of ‘retaliation’ when the romance ended. Another remarkable finding is that 39.1% of the respondents were negatively affected by their co-workers Office Romances. Thus the issue of Office Romances is subjective and management cannot ignore the findings. It is also worth noting the percentage of staff who have been involved previously and who currently are involved in Office Romances. According to the results, 42.2% or (n=54 out of 128) have been involved in Office Romances. Contrarily, 57.8% or (n=74 out of 128) not been involved. Thus it is not surprising that the remaining 18% or (n=23) represent the respondents currently involved. The majority of the participants in the study: 56.3% (n=72) were not aware of any written or oral company policy that addresses workplace romances; or, either had not been made aware of any such company policy, if it exists. 43.8% or (n=56) of respondents believed that written or oral company policy existed. 10.9% (n=14) consider Office Romances to be permitted. 16.4% (n=21) believe that Romances were permitted but discouraged. 36.7% (n=47) agreed that Romances were not permitted; and 35.9% or (n=46) do not know!

To summarize, within the sample group of employees there is a high level of uncertainty regarding company policy in relation to Office Romance. Regarding the company’s right to prohibit Office Romances apparently 59.4% of (n=76) of the participants ‘disagree’, while 40.6% or (n=52) ‘agreed’ on ‘direct intervention’, with subsequent ‘banning’ from the HR manager. The results indicate that the majority of the participants are in favor of staff ‘self-regulation’ and ‘self-control’ of the issue.

B.2. “ Why are Workplace Romances Discouraged or Not Permitted?”

The indicator figuratively shows that the majority; 26.6% or (n=34) of the respondents viewed Romances as unprofessional. Where 21.9% (n=28) have concerns about lowered productivity from those romantically involved. 21.1% or (n=27) worried about the potential for ‘Retaliation’ when the romance ended. 17.2% or (n=22) expressed concern about lowered morale of co-workers who had been involved in the Romance. 7.0% of the respondents expressed concern about possible litigation for claims of ‘sexual harassment’ and 6.3% of the respondents remained undecided. Another area of concern is: “Possible consequences if the employee breaks the company policy on Office Romances”. The majority - 35.9% or (n=46) of the respondents believe that there should be ‘no consequences’. 14.8% (n=19) consider that the employee should be given a ‘formal warning’ – either verbal or written. 10.9% (n=14) of the participants judged that the employment should be terminated. 10.2% (n=13) claim that the employee should be offered the opportunity to attend counseling, and 10.2% (n=13) respectively felt the employee should be suspended. 86.6% (n=11) felt that the employee should be offered a transfer within the organization and only 2 participants thought the employee should be demoted. 7.8% or (n=10) remained undecided.

B.3. The Resultant Outcome of Workplace Romances within the Organisation

Remarkable to note: 21.1% (n=27) of those involved in romance got married. 14.8% (n=19) claimed there was retaliation when the romance ended. 25.8% or (n=33) equally split, expressed claims of sexual harassment, decreased productivity and favoritism. Encouraging that 7.0% or (n=9) indicated increased productivity from those involved. 6.3% or (n=8) noted decreased morale from co-workers who had been involved. 9.4% or (n=12) reported an increase in workplace violence resulting from divorce of married employees. 5.5% or (n=7) felt that there was an increase in the morale of co-workers who were involved in the Romance, and 7% remained undecided.

B.4. Percentage Size of the Problem

39.1% of the respondents or (n=50) reinforced that there was a negative effect and in contrast 60.9% or (n=78) replied that they were not affected by colleagues Office Romances. 42.2% or (n=54) of respondents indicated that they had been previously involved in Office Romances, and 57.8% or (n=74) have not.

B.5. Taking the Present Number of Employees Involved in a Office Romance of 18%.

Where 43.50 female employees admitted they were not involved in an Office Romance; while 7.50 admitted they were. The percentage of males involved was similar at 62.78 not being involved; while 16.78 admitted they were.
Overall, it is assumed that the majority of employees questioned considered that the HR department and HR manager should implement more dynamic and sound company policy in their specific organization regarding Office Romances. The questioned participants felt this was because the HRM was regarded as ‘Holding an Independent Third Party Position’ in the matter. Consequently the HRM was viewed as being the best person to provide guidance on company policy to the employees involved, and, if necessary, issue verbal or written warnings on the matter.

V. Discussion

The study was exploratory, and voluntary, by nature and was mainly looking to HR Managers and employees for their ‘opinion and perception of Romantic Relations in the workplace’. In formatting the study, four aspects were taken into account. For hypothesis (1): The assumption was made that the organizations taking part may or may not have company policy in place covering Office Romances. Factually of the 4 organizations taking part in the sample none had a formal company policy on Office Romances in place. Surprisingly, while conducting the interviews and analyzing the survey results it became apparent that most of the employees taking part in the survey would pay ‘little to no attention’ should such a policy exist; and, its implications personally and possibly legally for both them and their employer. There was an overall feeling that the HR managers provided generalizations in their responses and relied on existing ‘Rule of Thumb’ company policy that had been adopted by the organization in the past. In other words, based on the results, we can presume that the 5 Star hotels in Northern Cyprus, and their HR departments are not familiar with the full implications and legal ramifications, contained in the matter of ‘Office Romances’ coupled with the possible harmful consequences to their organizations. Not surprisingly, attitudes towards Office Romances from every aspect generally tended to be negative and no one appeared concerned of possible future harmful effects. For this reason alone every HR manager indicated that the issue primarily needed to be handled by the direct line manager of the individual or individuals concerned. Should the line manager be unable to resolve the situation satisfactorily; then the HR manager should become involved issuing either a verbal or written warning to the individuals concerned. What became apparent to the researcher, as the primary factor for line management to become involved, was, if the Romance was causing negative or positive effects on the individual’s performance and productivity in carrying out their respective job. To this end both HR managers and employees alike were adamant that an Office Romance was a ‘Personal and Private’ matter which should not influence the individuals work performance. This leads the researcher to assume that the HR managers of the organizations involved in this study are less strict with staff involved in Office Romances as there are no company policies in place to provide guidance with a formal course of action to be followed. This lack of company policy leaves no other course of action other than ‘self-regulation’ by employees and their line managers. Hypothesis (2 and 3): Literature studied has revealed that organizational policies toward Office Romances are relatively uncommon, especially relating to different age groups. Based on the HR managers interviewed it is apparent that most Office Romances take place in the under 30 age group. As this age group were more amiable with a good line manager the effect was judged to be ‘positive or neutral’. Referring to the data it is not difficult to assume that female employees are generally negative in their approach towards Office Romances while their male counterparts are more open to such relationships. However, generation ‘Y’ born during 1980s - 1990s are more active in terms of relationships. Generation ‘Y’ has constant access to the latest technologies. Cell phones are a perfect example, allowing them to be more brave, audacious and in some way unsafe in their attitude towards Office Romances. This attitude requires the employers to reconsider their employment strategy for the next generation. Our last hypothesis (4) claims that male respondents are more in favor of such Romances. Both HR managers and the employee feedback indicates that male respondents are more inclined towards Office Romances, and in many cases would like to take the opportunity of such a relationship. They do not always take into account the repercussions of such an Office Romance. This was clearly supported from the interview observations. Finally, it is worth highlighting that organizations working in the field of Hospitality and Hotel Management in Northern Cyprus face a serious and complex set of employment, legal and social responsibilities and obligations which will necessitate HR Managers to become aware of, and adopt, the practice of labor law. The issue of equal rights will also require companies to reconsider the roles of both men and women in modern Turkish-Cypriot society. Traditionally the woman staying at home to raise the family, look after the husband and house is slowly disappearing. Twenty/thirty years ago business were reluctant to employ women, but now more and more women want to become actively engaged in a career, thus providing them with their own form of ‘independence’. Taking the example of Northern Cyprus hotels where the attitude tends to be more ‘traditional’ in regard to employment, and where they refer to the ‘final product’ whatever the cost. With the data collated and observed, the researcher can parallel more similarities where the Northern Cyprus organizations require essential company policy; especially where Office Romances are concerned. Considering that the attitude of most employees and HR Managers the Office Romances are a ‘private matter’. At the same time, it should be also presumed that it may be regarded as the company’s business and concern.
VI. Conclusion

The study represents an initial attempt to explore the nature and number of Office Romances in the Northern Cyprus Hotel Industry. Using case studies supplemented with secondary data to identify and conceptualize Office Romances. The study has succeeded in developing a framework upon which individual HR Managers can develop and implement managerial requirements for company policy in tourist destinations, like Northern Cyprus. This will provide the organisation with the potential to increase its labour competitiveness in the market place. The essential and proven result of this study is that individual HR managers acted indifferently on the subject of Office Romances, as they did not want to up-set the balance of the workplace and were keen for the matter to be dealt with by the direct line manager. They considered the matter to be of a ‘personal and private’ nature. Additionally, the employees themselves considered Office Romances a ‘private’ matter which could be dealt with by ‘self-regulation’. In conclusion, this study is central to the examination of the role of HR managers in Northern Cyprus with the subsequent formation of company policy which is essential in relation to Office Romances, thus avoiding future negativity of staff and the impact of any future litigation.

References