



THE OFFICE *romance*

EVERY DAY, PEOPLE GET UP, GO TO WORK ...
AND FALL IN LOVE. BUT IS THERE A HAPPY
EVER AFTER? BY **CATHERINE RODIE.**

Close proximity; intellectual stimulation; drinks nights ... with more people working longer hours in stressful and challenging roles, it comes as little surprise that professional relationships often blur into the personal.

Amanda Lambros, relationship expert and occupational therapy lecturer at Perth's Curtin University, says the way in which work colleagues learn to communicate with each other can imitate the early phase of a romantic relationship. "Seeing the way someone works and the passion they bring to the job can be a huge turn-on, and although you may not have been drawn to them at first, you start to feel the pull of attraction," says Lambros.

"Being able to confide in someone, being able to trust someone, being able to have open and honest communication with someone, these are all fundamental elements to intimate relationships – but they are also the elements that develop between work colleagues."

But after the initial temptation gives way to the thrill of covert lust, what happens next? Some of these liaisons never get past being affairs, or messy short-term relationships. But others lead to marriage.

Here, we meet three couples who dealt with their office romances in different ways; one couple who came clean immediately; one who kept their romance a secret; and finally, one whose affair was reported by a third party.

Rebecca Pinkstone and Tom Kehoe

met while working in a public service department in Sydney's inner west.

"I found Rebecca quite intimidating at first," says Tom. "Apart from being very striking, she also had a reputation for being a go-getter."

The pair had mutual friends within the office and found themselves socialising together frequently. "We started to have a bit of flirt with each other over drinks," says Tom.

While he was clear that he wanted to pursue the relationship, Rebecca was more hesitant. "Being a woman in a senior role, I was acutely aware that I needed to maintain my professionalism – I was wary of how my relationship with Tom might be perceived by others."

In addition, Rebecca was also very cautious about introducing her six-year-old son, Rafael, to a "boyfriend" unless it was someone she was serious about. This meant that once she had decided to go for it, the relationship progressed very quickly. "I didn't want to muck about," she says.

Rebecca opted to come clean with her boss after her first date with Tom. "It was clear that we really liked each other, and I didn't want my boss to hear about it via office gossip."

Tom wasn't as keen to inform his boss. "Being English, I'm quite reserved. It wasn't a conversation that I really wanted to have – it was very awkward."

The couple dated for a year before deciding to move in together. At this stage, by coincidence, Rebecca was seconded to another organisation – a move they both welcomed. "It was a nice thing to happen at that stage in our



relationship," says Tom. "It meant that we weren't in each other's face all day."

Rebecca and Tom had assumed that their co-workers had been gossiping about their relationship, but they found the reverse to be true. In fact, one of the guests at Rebecca's farewell afternoon tea had not even realised that they were together.

Recently, the couple welcomed a baby boy, Noah, into their family. Rebecca is due to return to work at the original organisation early in the New Year.

"I used to joke that there were only a few attractive men in our workplace and Tom was one of them," says Rebecca. "And now I've ended up falling in love with him."

Jodi and David Zimmer might have got off to a difficult start in their relationship when they met at an insurance firm in Sydney, but they're happily married now.

Jodi didn't think David was marriage material when they first met. "He had been seeing a couple of different girls in the office," says Jodi. "I thought he was a bit of a player."

But over a few drinks at an after-work function, David charmed his way into Jodi's heart. "We shared a cheeky kiss on the dance floor," he says.

Jodi was very apprehensive about starting a relationship with a colleague. "I kept thinking of that old expression, 'Don't screw the crew'," she says. "I wondered what our colleagues would think."

As their relationship developed, Jodi was determined to keep it a secret from her boss and the rest of their tight-knit team. "David and I worked very closely together, we sat next to each other and would spend time sending each other flirty emails," she says.

The pair used a variety of tactics to hide their relationship from colleagues. "If we were coming into the office together in the morning, Jodi would

always go up first and send me around the block a few times before heading upstairs," says David.

At the office Christmas party, Jodi and David made a conscious effort to stay away from each other. But when they saw the photos a few weeks later, they realised that they hadn't been as subtle as they'd hoped. "If you looked at the photos carefully, you could see Jodi and I in the background with our hands all over each other," says David.

On another occasion, after working late together, a stolen kiss led to a steamy encounter in the lift. While the couple enjoyed a passionate embrace, the lift travelled to the top of the building – at which point an unsuspecting cleaner tried to board.

"I just said, 'Sorry mate, the lift's full', and closed the doors," says David.

Jodi was mortified, concerned that the cleaner would report them or that the encounter had been captured on CCTV.

After five months, they decided to move in together. It was at this stage that Jodi and David 'fessed up to their boss – by sending separate emails informing her of their new, and now shared, address. "I emailed her first," explains Jodi. "Then, 15 minutes later, David sent his email."

Fortunately, their boss took the news well. "She replied to us both saying, 'I think the whole company has known for the last five months,'" recalls David.

The pair continued to live together and work side by side for another 12 months before David left to go to another job. The relationship is still going strong; they are married and have two young children.

"I don't think I could work with David now," says Jodi. "He would drive me crazy."

Lucy Cleaver* and Geoff Hilton* were both happily married when they started working at a small Melbourne law firm. Working in different departments, the pair had very little to do with each



other until they were both assigned to the same case.

There was a lot of tension between different members of the team, and although Lucy admits now that she found Geoff attractive, she also thought that he was a "grumpy bastard".

As the case developed, it frequently became necessary for the team to travel interstate. They were all working long hours and under enormous pressure, but the need to unwind led to a number of late dinners.

"We started to get to know each other better," says Lucy. "Away from the office politics, we got on really well."

Recognising that feelings were beginning to develop between them, Lucy started to withdraw. But despite a cooling of their social relationship, they still had to work together, and when they weren't together they would spend hours chatting via iMessage. "One night we talked for more than four hours," says Lucy.

At this point, the opportunity for a sabbatical took Geoff overseas for three months. It was a defining period in their relationship.

"I really missed Geoff," says Lucy. "I got up early every morning so I could get into work before anyone else and spend time talking to him on the phone."

When Geoff returned to the firm's Melbourne office, the pair made an arrangement to see each other to "catch up". It was at this time that their affair started in earnest.

Taking advantage of interstate work trips together, they stole what time they could. There were a few "close calls" along the way. "A colleague caught me in the corridor one night," says Lucy, "I was on my way to Geoff's room, but had to pretend I was looking for ice!"

But then their complicated relationship became even more problematic. Lucy's husband discovered the affair. Hurt and angry, he wanted to put a stop to it – so

he made a move that had the potential to shatter Lucy's career and contacted her boss. "My boss called me into his office and told me about the call he had received from my husband," says Lucy. "I had to tell him that yes, it was all true.

"Fortunately, my boss knew that Geoff and I worked well together and that our affair had not affected the case."

They decided to split, but after just 24 hours they both knew that they couldn't be apart. "I had to go back to my boss and tell him that we were going to continue the affair," explains Lucy. "It was pretty awkward, but I needed to be honest."

Lucy's marriage dissolved and her husband moved out of their shared apartment. Although she was still seeing Geoff romantically, they didn't discuss the possibility of him leaving his wife. "I didn't want to put any pressure on him," Lucy explains.

At work the pair continued to hide their relationship from their co-workers, although they wondered if people were talking. "One of our colleagues had spotted us holding hands," says Geoff. "We tried to laugh it off, but we knew she would be suspicious after that."

When Geoff decided to separate from his wife, he and Lucy were able to pursue their relationship more openly. It was at this point their boss suggested that it would be a good idea to tell the rest of the team.

"Most of our colleagues have been supportive," says Lucy. "Some of them did admit that they thought something was going on. There has been a lot of gossip and giggling among the secretaries, but we're okay with that."

Although Lisa and Geoff's colleagues were accepting of their affair, the firm's human resources department was not so accommodating. "We got called into a meeting with our boss and an HR manager," explains Geoff. "It was



really embarrassing as they asked a lot of personal questions.”

It was agreed at the meeting that Lucy and Geoff would no longer work closely together, a decision they now laugh about. “We actually make a very good team,” says Lucy. “So it’s a shame not to make the most of that.” ●

* Names have been changed.

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Top: Tom Kehoe and Rebecca Pinkstone came clean to their boss straight away.

Above: David and Jodi Zimmer originally kept their office romance a secret.

