



## WORKPLACE ROMANCE: RATIONALE FOR HUMAN RESOURCE PRACTITIONERS' INTERVENTION. A CASE OF A LOCAL AUTHORITY IN ZIMBABWE



Moment Bhebhe<sup>1†</sup> --- Eugene Hove<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Department of Human Resource Management, Midlands State University (MSU), Zimbabwe

### ABSTRACT

Workplace romance is a reality in many organizations, both at a global scale and in the Zimbabwe context but according to *Powell and Foley (1998)* it is also a subject that is rarely talked about by scholars evidenced by meagre scholarly literature. In this regard the high frequency in which these relationships occur has not been quite proportionate to the minimal attention that Zimbabwean H.R practitioners have given the subject of workplace romance. In this light, it is fundamental to explore workplace romance in a Zimbabwean context so as to further understand this phenomenon. *Ariani et al. (2011)* emphasize that H.R leaders should think more broadly and strategically about managing workplace romance. Furthermore, the scholars argue that the H.R leaders should be at the heart of managing workplace romance by taking ownership of and accountability for the challenging task of managing risks and rewards of workplace romance. This research study explored the forms of workplace romance in a local authority in Zimbabwe and the role played by Human Resource Practitioners in managing it. A sample size of 27 respondents was drawn from a sample frame of 73 employees who make up the staff compliment of personnel at the headquarters that houses the administrative departments of the local authority. Moreover, the research endeavor was qualitative in nature, making use of semi-structured interviews and semi-structured questionnaires as primary sources of data as well as company material and various literature as secondary data sources. The qualitative approach was resourceful in the research in as far as providing a rich, comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the subject under study.

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**Keywords:** Workplace romance, Human resources, Sexual harassment, Performance, Local authority, Zimbabwe.

### Contribution/ Originality

This study contributes in the existing literature on workplace romance. Human Resource practitioners often shy away from dealing with romantic relationships at the workplace, a case in point in an African country such as Zimbabwe where studies on such matters have not been carried out.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of workplace romance is a subject of fascination, disgruntlement and indifference among employees in any workplace setting. Where some employees are fascinated to see two employees engaged in a romantic relationship other employees tend to be indifferent while others frown at such relationships. Professionals in the Human Resources (H.R) section argue that the major problem therefore has been that employees are ignorant as to whether these romantic relationships are right or wrong, and the impact that these relationships have to those

† Corresponding author

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observing and those who are engaged in the romantic relationships. Consequently, another sticking point is whether workplace romance may or may not affect performance. Lastly, the question that arises is what role the Human Resource function plays in the scale of such issues.

Extramarital affairs have sprouted with spouses (from outside the organization) vividly approaching the local authority, causing mayhem within the complex, and reporting that their spouses were involved in workplace romantic relationships with colleagues. This becomes a major problem impacting on service delivery once the name of the local authority is brought into disrepute. Human resource practitioners therefore must become the enablers for the conception and preservation of a workplace environment that promotes a performance agenda which is free from disruptive behaviors.

This study objectives were to establish the role of H.R practitioners in managing workplace romance by identifying forms of workplace romance in existence at the local authority; determining their implications on employee performance; identifying the challenges faced by H.R in managing workplace romance; and exploring H.R strategies adopted at the local authority to manage workplace romance.

The workplace is a 'unique' setting because it is a random compilation of individuals who are 'unique' in their thoughts, actions and motives. While an organization is goal directed and goal orientated, it is also a social environment where employees familiarize themselves at a more personal and more casual level. Employee to employee invitations to weekend functions, corporate cocktail parties, after hour's home visits and lunchtime retreats to food outlets give testimony to the fact that employees tend to acquaint themselves on a personal and casual level. However, it is in this regard that during this process some female and male employees of the same entity tend to develop a romantic attraction towards each other. Zajonc (1968) suggests that individuals who work in close proximity to one another are prone to developing interpersonal relationships more frequently than are those who do not work side by side. Zajonc (1968) refers to this as the exposure effect because of the acquaintanceship that the two employees share.

In as much as attraction is a natural phenomenon between different sexes even at the workplace they however attract complexities from an organizational perspective and therefore the human resources practitioners have a legitimate interest in these, in order to maintain a workplace environment that is performance oriented. Some of these complexities lie in the motives of individuals involved in the relationship. They begin to feel that their relationships should go beyond the scope of the workplace and consequently culminate into long term relationships. The workplace romantic relationship may either be temporary or culminate in marriage. Parties to the relationship may be single, married or in committed relationship outside the workplace.

From a business point of view, however, workplace romance may create uneasiness among both the employees engaging in the workplace romance, other employees who are observing the workplace romance as well as the work these employees are hired to do which forms part of the internal business processes of the organization. It is in this background therefore, that such people issues tend to warrant the attention of Human Resource Practitioners who are the custodians of performance management as they seek to mitigate the potential negative effects of such relationship set ups on overall business processes.

Mainiero (1986) argues that workplace romance can be defined as some form of intimate relationship between two employees who have both expressed their romantic feelings in the form of dating or other intimate association. Further still, Peirce *et al.* (1996) emphasize that at a broad level, a workplace romantic relationship is any relationship between two members of the same organization that entails mutual attraction. In essence, it is evident in these definitions that have been advanced that workplace romance occurs in a workplace setting, involves two employees of the same entity and that it is an activity which both individuals consciously engage in because the attraction between them is reciprocal.

In the international circles workplace romance is very US-centric as it is a phenomena of much focus in organizations in the United States of America. Boyd (2010) contends that a preponderance of literature on the subject of workplace romance originates from the United States. He further contends that out of a total of 400 articles on the

topic, there is just one article from outside the US for every 10 articles originating from the States. An article by Solomon (1998) suggests that workplace romance is as old as work itself when she maintains that "office romances have occurred ever since men and women have been thrown together in the workplace." Gomes, Owens & Morgan (2006) cited in Biggs *et al.* (2012) argue that, "wherever there is a workplace, there may be workplace romance." Civil (1998) and Lee (2006) cited in Biggs *et al.* (2012) also argue that sexuality will never be completely absent from the workplace. The realization that romance is existent in the workplace context also brings to light the fact that romantic relationships do not only exist in other traditional social institutions such as peer groupings, the school or church but also the workplace. This therefore is reason enough to warrant the attention of H.R practitioners in managing these relationships.

From an African perspective, the activities of work were guided by a system of division of labor which was based on sex. The males hunted, fought in battles as a means of defense as well as reared cattle while the females separately performed household duties of cooking, child rearing and gathering of wild fruits. However, from this state of affairs, modern work systems have taken a different modernist trajectory that has seen men and women working together in workplace settings. This therefore makes it compelling that the concept of workplace romance be studied at global scale to increase on the body of knowledge.

Powell (1999) argues that in the recent times work has been characterized by sexuality and physical intimacy. He further states that this has been attributed to the increased proportion of women in the labor force, particularly in managerial and professional jobs as well as the expectation of employees to spend longer hours at work. According to Warfield (1987) cited in Williams *et al.* (1999) "today's organizational woman works, interacts, travels, socializes, and relaxes with her male colleagues more than ever before. Such intense involvement is a potential breeding ground for both sexual attraction and romantic relationships." Moreover, the increase of women in the paid labor force has been largely due to the women's rights movements advocating for women to have equal opportunities with their male counterparts. Resultantly, Dillard (1987) argues that the increased presence of women led to increased interaction between men and women. This interaction may also lead to the development of a romantic relationship. In addition, Solomon (1998) argues that employees are working longer hours in environments that encourage teamwork and familiarity. Through this emphasis on teamwork employees find themselves working for longer hours and spending more time at work in a bid to complete certain projects. This consequently leaves them with very little time to interact and discover new people outside the workplace apart from their work colleagues with whom they tend to be more familiar with.

Though the nature of workplace romance is clear and appears to be straight forward in relationships between one co-worker to the other, such relationships may be very intricate when it is a superior to subordinate workplace romance or when one or both of the individuals engaged in the romantic relationship is/are in a marriage with someone else outside the organization. An example can be given of a spouse of an employee who storms into the organization claiming that his or her partner is rumored to be involved in an affair at work. In the process, it can be noted that during such a charade the business process is affected. Firstly, the incident becomes a source of gossip among other employees, for that moment production can stop as employees become inquisitive about the incident, the corporate image may be soiled if the incident is picked by the media. Moreover, the affected worker may leave employment leading H.R practitioners to incur expenses in recruitment so as to replace the vacant post. Furthermore, it is also pertinent to offer guidelines to those single employees who engage in workplace romance for genuine reasons of marriage. Such guidelines will be resourceful in managing consequences that emerge when the romantic workplace relationship fizzles out. HR practitioners therefore have a role to play in order to maintain a workplace environment free from disruptions that may emanate from workplace romance.

In cases where there is a superior to subordinate office romance it should be noted that issues of power come into play. This is because the superior may treat his or her subordinate lover in a way that communicates favoritism in the minds of other fellow employees because of his or her position of power. The allocation of resources and tasks may be favorably skewed towards the supervisor's lover thereby creating disgruntlement and discouragement among other

co-workers. This therefore will tend to go against the ethical considerations of equal treatment and equal opportunities for all employees. For example, the superior may turn a blind eye towards his or her subordinate lover for reporting late for work or absence from work without authorized leave. All these circumstances will inevitably cause disharmony within the organization. On the same note, Daniel and Kleiner (1999) also embrace the view that relations between superiors and subordinates present challenges at the workplace when the superior abuses his or her position to sanction unlawful gain to his or her lover. The subordinate lover can for example unjustly benefit through high performance ratings. Another angle that can manifest is when the romantic relationship between the boss and the subordinate turns sour and breaks down. The superior may create a difficult working environment through formulating difficult tasks with nearly impossible deadlines which may be tantamount to constructive dismissal.

However, there is a thin line between workplace romance and sexual harassment. Haspels *et al.* (2001) define sexual harassment as unwanted conduct of a sexual nature, or other conduct based on sex, affecting the dignity of women and men at work. This can include unwelcome physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct. Where workplace romance is consensual, sexual harassment is usually coercive and non-consensual in nature. Further still, sexual harassment is not only unethical but also criminal as it attracts the interference of the state as a prosecutor. However so, cases of workplace romance tend to degenerate into sexual harassment in some cases, for example where one of the two lovers wishes to terminate the relationship and the other employee continues to pursue and make advances of a sexual nature on the 'former lover' such may amount to sexual harassment as these actions will be unwanted and unwelcome by the other party. On the other hand, if the romantic relationship was not known at the workplace, the rejected party can falsely accuse the other party of sexual harassment yet this may not have been the case. Such situations therefore give reason for management to intervene in the occurrences of romantic relationships at work.

It is of fundamental importance also to infer on the implications of workplace romance on performance. Since it has been established that an organization is a going concern that exists so as to make profits for its shareholders and provide goods or services for its clientele, organizational performance then becomes paramount in achieving these goals. Essentially, the achievement of these organizational goals is predetermined by the performance of the employees themselves who directly contribute to the organizational performance as a whole.

The question that needs to be answered however is whether or not workplace romance does have a bearing on employee performance. In a workplace setup, a romantic relationship may not only affect the individuals engaged in the relationship but also the employees who watch the relationship. In situations where the relationship involves individuals who are at different hierarchical levels for instance a manager or manageress and a subordinate, other co-workers may feel or assume that the subordinate is receiving special treatment. The special treatment may manifest in the form of a promotion, increase in remuneration, special assignments and other niceties which are not enjoyed by other employees. Davis (2012) maintains that if the manager favors his or her workplace lover, the message that is sent to the other employees is that hard work and persistence do not always pay but rather what is important is whom one is sleeping with. In light of this, other employees may lose faith and trust in management so much that they may think if they put more effort in performing their duties management may not notice their performance. Sexual favoritism at work will potentially lead to decreased work performance and the whole organization may suffer.

More still, an office romance that ensues between a boss and a subordinate can culminate into litigation where one lover can falsely sue the other lover when the relationship falters. There can be implications to the organization especially when the two employees are no longer performing their work or their duties as they need to spend most of the employers' time attending to their court case as a result of the legal action filed against each other. Workplace romance may also be detrimental to work performance where the supervisor who is dating a subordinate whom he or she is supervising directly experiences role conflict. This means that the supervisor has two roles to play, the role of being a lover and a supervisor at the same time. The supervisor may be in the dilemma of acting in a manner that is professional yet at the same time trying to please his or her 'sweetheart'. These double standards, however have a bearing on the performance of the supervisor at work.

It is also important to point out the implications that may arise when two co-workers end their romantic office relationship. When the relationship fizzles out the two employees must still endure the need to face each other in work processes. If this happens, one cannot rule out the strain and tension that can follow a disengagement from a workplace romance. Though the office romance could initially be marred by exhilaration, joyfulness and pleasure a break up could result in sorrow, tension, strain and heartbreaks. An employee's performance may be compromised as he or she tries to recover from the break-up during this 'grieving' period. Failed relationships can also result in unwanted turnover as one or both individuals decide to leave the organization due to post romantic awkwardness and tension of having to deal with a former lover on a daily basis. This essentially also leads to decreased performance through loss of essential staff which is attributed to this turnover. Trivial as it may appear gossip among other employees watching the romantic relationship unfold may also consume a lot of time at the workplace which could otherwise be used in productive work. Rapp (1992) cited in Peirce *et al.* (1996) argues that co-workers may spend a lot of time discussing the romantic relationship that exists between the boss and the subordinate instead of working and in the process this impedes performance at both individual level and organizational level.

Though workplace romance is largely viewed in a negative light it is important to highlight that it also comes with certain advantages and benefits both for the participants, the peers as well as the organization as a whole. This is particularly evident in situations where the relationship culminates into a marriage. The participants may be happy and feel motivated due to this huge achievement of finding a significant other within the organization. Landy (1985) cited in Wright and Cropanzano (2007) argue that employees who are happy with their work will exhibit higher job performance and will be less likely to turnover. If for instance, the employee who has found marriage as a result of a workplace romance is a customer contact employee, the employee may also provide a level of customer satisfaction and care to the clients as he or she is both a motivated and a happy employee. Anderson & Hunsaker (1985) cited in Peirce *et al.* (1996) advanced the idea that as a result of romance in a workplace arrangement the impact of negative elements to work such as stresses, anxieties and tensions is reduced. After a survey conducted by Mainiero (1989) he further suggested that the existence of workplace relationships can be uplifting thereby creating a happier work environment. Hochschild (1998) in her ethnographic study cited in Williams *et al.* (1999) suggests that workplace romance is a necessary aspect of work life in that workers feel relaxed at work because the environment is more interesting than the home environment.

The paper is theoretically guided by the model advancing antecedents and consequences of workplace romance, which is adapted from Peirce *et al.* (1996) This conceptual framework was essential in facilitating a comprehensive understanding into workplace romance and the role of H.R in managing the same. The model assisted in conceptualizing the reasons behind the formation of romantic workplace relationships and the consequences of such relationships on the employer, employees as well as the organization in its entirety. The model shows that the workplace romance firstly develops due spatial proximity or nearness of the employees at a workplace setting. The repeated exposure of the employees as they work in teams or on projects which they have been mandated predisposes them to be attracted to one another and begin to share similar beliefs, values and interests making the pair compatible and ultimately manifest into a romantic attraction and the desire for workplace romance.

The social construction perspective is seen as an important theoretical baseline for the research on workplace romantic relationships. The theory conceptualizes organizations and workplace romantic relationships as socially constructed entities constituted in member interaction with romantic relationship existing in the partners' communication with one another Sias and Cahill (1998). Hutchison and Charlesworth (2003) argue that people are seen as social beings who interact with each and develop understanding of the world and themselves from social interaction thus shaping their subsequent social interactions. The workplace therefore provides an environment where employees begin to 'find' each other, socialize and even develop romantic relationships from their constant interaction. This perspective is of paramount contribution to the understanding of human behavior in any institution of a society including the workplace. Therefore, HR practitioners must fully understand the impact that a workplace

environment may have towards fostering interactions that may also contribute to the development of romantic relationships.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The researchers employed a qualitative approach using a single case study of a local authority in Zimbabwe in carrying out this research. Data was gathered within a period of a month. The qualitative approach was helpful in richly capturing the views of respondents in the organization under study while enabling probing into the thoughts and ideas of the respondents so as to acquire a comprehensive insight of the role of H.R in managing workplace romance. Myers (2009) argues that qualitative data can help understand people, their motivations and actions and the broader context within which these people work and live. The sampling frame for this study was 46 made up of 6 heads of sections and 40 general employees. The actual sample was 27 respondents who included heads of sections including the human resources practitioners as well as general employees. Four heads of sections (2 males and 2 females) selected purposively responded to a semi-structured interview while a semi structured questionnaire was administered to 23 general personnel (14 males and 9 females) who were selected using the quota sampling technique. To ensure validity of the data collection tools the researchers triangulated using two instruments in order to obtain credible information from respondents. Collaboration by researchers ensured the reliability of the data collection process. The qualitative thematic approach was used in identifying and organizing data as well as in interpreting and analyzing findings from the study. The major limitation faced was due to the sensitivity nature of the topic with respondents not comfortable to give information they considered private. However with assurances from the researchers on upholding ethical principles of confidentiality and anonymity respondents opened up.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In terms of respondents' profiles, among the 4 heads of sections, 2 were females and 2 males and all the 4 were married. From the 14 male and 9 female general staff, 17 were married, 5 single and 1 widowed. All respondents possessed a minimum qualification of a diploma.

### 3.1. Prevalent Forms of Workplace Romance at the Local Authority

Research findings revealed that co-worker to co-worker relationships as well as superior to subordinate relationships were the most prevalent forms of romantic relationships at the local authority. Heads of sections also confirmed the existence of superior to superior relationships although they perceived these to be on a smaller scale and not easily identifiable as management were able to conceal them in the eyes of the workplace public.

#### 3.1.1. Co-Worker to Co-Worker

Shop floor respondents stated that they often spend ten or more hours of the day in or around the workplace with peers than at home or in social circles and this would draw them closer as peers, establishing bonds beyond work issues but also social, personal and even intimately. It is at this level that workplace romantic relationships begin to blossom between members of the opposite sex within and across departments. Respondents also stated that these peer to peer relationships help them to build social support, safety nets and deal with home stressors. This conforms to Peirce *et al.* (1996) model which advances that workplace romance firstly develops due spatial proximity or nearness of the employees at a workplace setting and 'couples' begin to share similar beliefs, values and interests making the pair compatible and ultimately manifest into a romantic attraction and the desire for workplace romance.

Genuine peer or co-worker to co-worker romantic relationships can be beneficial to both the participants as these may culminate into a marriages. Some respondents stated that they found their life partners within the organization and were happily married further highlighting that this gives them security in the marriage as they were able to monitor each other's' movements. This as they stated eliminated wrangles over allegations of promiscuity or as one put it 'cheating' by either partner. Wilson, Filosa and Fennel (2003) cited in Lickey *et al.* (2009) found that 55% of

workplace romances end in marriage, so workplace romance can lead to positive organizational outcomes as energies associated with workplace romance may be channeled into work. A head of department also concurred to the existence of married partners in the organization, although he also stated that there were times were couples failed to separate work from home issues culminating into fights which would impact on their man-hour and the human resources department having to constantly play counsellor to the couples, thus '*wasting precious time that could be used to concentrate on performance and productivity issues*'. Similar views are shared by [Lickey et al. \(2009\)](#) who state that peer romantic relationships at work bring problems as partners spent inordinate amounts of time together instead of attending to work tasks. They further contend that productivity may be lowered.

However, though co-worker to co-worker relationships may appear to be innocent at face value, they may cause problems especially when the workplace romance is one between married individuals; it becomes a subject of gossip within and outside the organization and through this, employees will tend to spend more time gossiping than carrying out their duties. More so, this may soil the corporate image of the entity. Such relationships may send a message that seems to communicate that the entity which the lovers belong to condones adulterous relationships. It therefore becomes legitimate for human resource practitioners to have an interest in these relationships to ensure organizational performance is not compromised.

### 3.1.2. Superior to Subordinate

The arguments regarding superior to subordinate relationships are supported by [Daniel and Kleiner \(1999\)](#) who equally expressed that a workplace romance between a boss and a subordinate presents some challenges of its own because in a hierarchical workplace romance the lover who is a boss may abuse his or her position to sanction certain favors to the subordinate lover not on the strength of merit or experience but rather based on the relationship that is obtaining between the two. In essence, it is evident that performance is compromised as organizational goals and ethics are subordinated to individual interests. Respondents perceived that at the local authority a number of management personnel in romantic relationships with subordinates were abusing their authority through such acts as unfair allocation of resources, giving their subordinate lovers unnecessary time off on several occasions, tolerating their subordinate lovers' mistakes, coming to work late and unfairly appraising them. One head of department strengthened that at one point a line manager was accused of unfairly facilitating the promotion of a subordinate lover. This favoritism or perceived favoritism by a superior can act as a de-motivator to the other employees who are not participants to the workplace romance as they may see one's progression on the career ladder as attributed to his or her relationship with a boss. A similar argument is raised by [Powell \(1999\)](#) who argues that romantic relationships in organizational settings may also result in co-workers' perceptions of workplace inequities. It is in this way that such an inequitable situation may in turn demotivate spectator employees and consequently spill over to affect their performance.

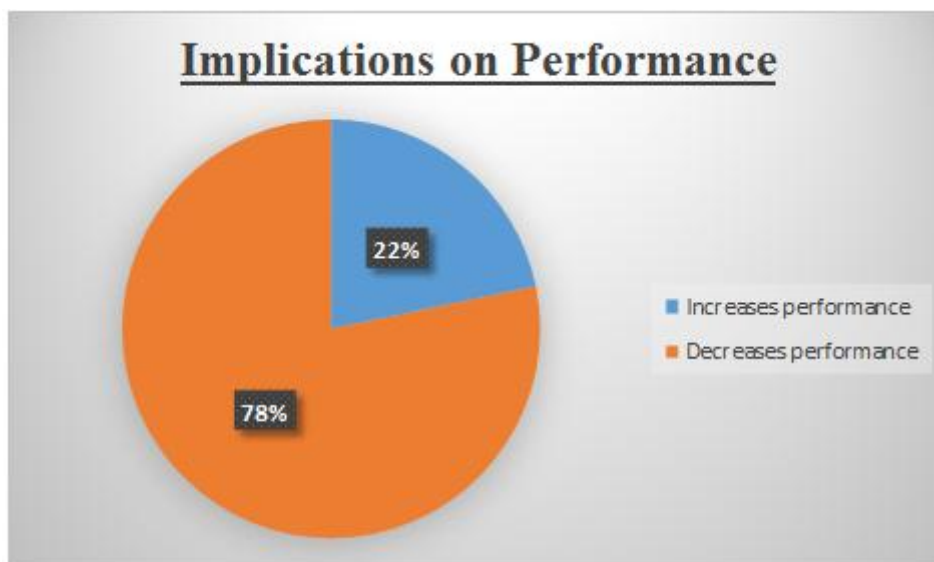
On the other hand, an ended relationship may predispose the subordinate to victimization from the boss who may make employment unbearable by way of setting unrealistic targets and demands. A hierarchical workplace romance may not only create favoritism but also perceived favoritism on the part of other employees who are spectators. More so, hierarchical workplace romance may compromise performance and quality as the boss may accept sub-standard work from the subordinate.

Furthermore, a hierarchical workplace romance may also present some challenges of its own especially when both parties are married thereby making the workplace romance an extra-marital affair. Such a situation is epitomized by [Isikoff & Thomas \(1998\)](#) cited in [Powell \(1999\)](#) who said the following, "when a public official is involved in a workplace romance, as was U.S President Bill Clinton with White House intern Monica Lewinsky, the relationship receives an enormous amount of public attention." Findings did not reveal the benefits to management of engaging in such relationships. It is in this background and quite imperative that human resources policies and programs be put in place to ensure the achievement of organizational goals remains undistracted by the romantic relationships that may be sprouting in the workplace and the challenges they may present. In the local authority findings revealed that the

human resources department was aware of the existence of these forms of romantic relationships but did not conduct an analysis on their nature and effect to the organization's bottom line.

### 3.1.3. Implications of Workplace Romance on Employee Performance at the Local Authority

Another dimension that the researchers were interested in was whether or not a workplace romance had any implications on the performance of individuals at work. Figure 1 below indicates the general employees' responses concerning the implications of workplace romance on performance



**Fig-1.** Employee perceptions on the implications of workplace romance on performance  
Source: Field Research

Figure 1 above indicates that 78% of the respondents felt that workplace romance decreases employee performance while 22% of the respondents shared a different view by saying that workplace romance does increase employee performance. The arguments were that employee performance would decrease because the lovers would want to spend more time with each other rather than concentrating on the core aspects of their job descriptions. A female head of section reiterated the same point by saying that lovers working at the same station would frequently visit each other's offices during working hours, use company landlines to call each other since the cost is free as well as use the internet to communicate via the social networking sites. Thus, it can be noted that organizational goals are then subordinated to satisfy the love interests of the workplace romance participants and there is wastage of time and resources and consequently performance suffers.

On the other hand a male head of section echoed the same sentiments arguing that workplace romance will inevitably affect performance negatively since there will be, "*pinching of the employers' time as people do what is not in their job descriptions*". A female shop floor employee strengthened that performance is affected in a negative way by saying that,

*"People tend to relax knowing that they are in a relationship with the superior and there is nothing they can do because of the relationship"*.

Another shop floor employee contended that indeed workplace romance decreases performance as a superior may accept substandard work from a subordinate lover so that he or she may gain mileage in the relationship thereby negatively affecting performance. This is consistent with Powell (1993) cited in Powell (1999) who argued that workplace romance may result in conflicts of interest, flawed or biased decision making and other inequities that negatively affect performance.

However some shop-floor employees expressed that romantic relationships at work do increase ones' performance. According to one male shop-floor employee performance increases because both individuals in a



romantic relationship would want to impress each other during the performance of their duties. He stated that both parties become motivated to do well at work as they are often in contact and this energy and excitement they may have towards each other can be translated into effective task performance. This is in line with [Michelson et al. \(2010\)](#) argument that while establishing a direct connection between romance and job performance is very difficult, the consequences of workplace romance are not only harmful but can have positive benefits for workplace romance participants. A male managerial employee argued that,

*“Other individuals have survived work pressure through workplace romance and have actually been motivated in the process so much that through this motivation they would then be driven to perform highly”* .

Respondents from the Human Resource department acknowledged the implications of workplace romance on employee performance however revealing that they had not crafted a workplace framework that would deal with these thriving relationships, given the impact they brought on performance issues. An Officer within the department said that the organization had not given much thought on workplace romance issues before although they were often ceased with numerous cases were one of the lovers in the event of disintegrated relationships (if not their real spouses) visiting the organization to cause a ‘scene’ over alleged infidelities. However, this study revealed that quite often HR people would ask the parties involved to solve the matter as adults without involving the organization, more so the organization would ask the parties to go to the boardroom within the premises to settle their matter. This shows high levels of un-involvement by the local authority on such matters which certainly disrupted normal company production time. HR people remained mum.

### **3.2. Human Resource Strategies for Managing Workplace Romance at the Local Authority**

Research interactions with respondents and specifically those in the HR department revealed that the organization currently did not have any policy or strategy of dealing with workplace romance. Even the conditions of service at the local authority revealed that there was no provision for workplace romance. A workplace policy or code detailing romantic issues is ideal as advanced by [Ariani et al. \(2011\)](#) that, “a workplace romance policy should at minimum, state and justify the following: (a) types of romances that are permitted or encouraged (b) types of romances that are discouraged (c) types of romances that are prohibited and (d) actions management will take if employees violate any of the terms in the policy. [Ariani et al. \(2011\)](#) further state that there should be written codes of ethical conduct that incorporate workplace romance. This would aid manage the nature of the romantic relationships and more importantly deal with its effects which may affect the performance of the employees at work, thereby impacting on the bottom line, in the instance of a local authority, service delivery.

Respondents, however were of the view that the HR department could have a role to play in managing these romantic relationships as they had performance implications. Policy formulation, counselling and facilitating workshops and trainings were noted as the critical areas through with HR people could intervene so as to protect the brand of the local authority in the eyes of the public and prospective employees in the labor market.

Most respondents argued that the organization should ban workplace romantic relationships except for those married couples within the local authority whom they felt would not publicly ‘showcase’ their relationships. However, [Biggs et al. \(2012\)](#) state that policies that outlaw workplace romance completely force individuals into a secrecy culture. This is because banning workplace romance may make participants more secretive about their relationships, therefore making it difficult to manage and even have dire consequences for the organization in terms of attaining effective service delivery.

### **3.3. Challenges Faced By the Human Resource Department in Managing Workplace Romance**

Findings from the HR department revealed that individuals involved in romantic relationships at the local authority may be difficult to identify and those involved would not come out in the open and declare their relationships. Some general employees and heads of sections were of the view that ‘witch hunting’ by management on the relationships would be tantamount to invading in the private life of employees. The subject of resistance is

typical in previous workplace romance researches where relational participants would resist the organizations' effort in seeking to delve into their relationships arguing that this would amount to intrusion to one's private life. A research paper by Mufson cited in [Boyd \(2010\)](#) illustrates this when the C.E.O of British Petroleum (B.P) stated that, "for the past 41 years of my career at BP I have kept my private life separate from my business life. I have always regarded my sexuality as a personal matter, to be kept private." In this regard, it can be seen that there is agreement on resistance between what is obtaining in the case organization and other big and reputable organizations like British Petroleum. In essence, employees will tend to compartmentalize their life by separating their work life and their private life and this may however present a challenge in the management of workplace romance by H.R practitioners.

A managerial employee at the local authority highlighted that sexual harassment claims have been made by one of the parties when the relationship has gone sour only to learn during the investigation process that in actual fact the employees were in a romantic relationship. HR people confirmed that they have handled a number of cases related to sexual harassment claims but upon investigation no evidence would prove the claims correct. A head of section further gave a real life experience of a case of workplace romance in the organization involving two former employees;

*"A female kitchen employee (Agnes) claimed sexual harassment against a security guard (Julius). However, after sometime it emerged that both Julius and Agnes were once involved in a romantic relationship at work. Consequently, when the workplace romance eventually fizzled out, Agnes claimed sexual harassment against Julius....it was therefore noted that the two had been working at the same station for quite a long time and it was during that time that a romantic relationship developed. Fellow colleagues noticed that the security guard started spending more time at the kitchen and reporting late for duty after tea break".* (for the protection of the identities of the employees pseudonyms are used).

Cases of sexual harassment present challenges for HR practitioners to manage especially if involving partners in romantic relationships. These may be costly and take a lot of time to investigate thus 'eating' on company's time to concentrate on the primary responsibility to ensure targets are met. In some organizations electronic monitoring systems have been introduced and this has gone a long way in addressing performance issues and curb on tendencies that promote workplace romance. This is supported by [Cox et al. \(2005\)](#) who reiterated that the monitoring of employees ensures that there are efficient and productive work habits which in turn increase efficiency and boost productivity. More so, according to [Allen et al. \(2007\)](#) surveillance would help shape a positive and non-abusive organizational culture and professional work environment that may help curb sexual abuse. It may be worthwhile to establish workplace surveillance systems.

#### 4. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Establish a workplace romance policy- The case organization through its Human Resource function should come up with a clearly defined and written workplace romance policy stating the types of romances that are permitted or encouraged, types of romances that are discouraged, types of romances that are prohibited and finally the actions management will take if employees violate any of the terms in the policy.
- Engage in education, training and counselling- The Human Resource through its training function can organize occasional workshops to provide education and training as a means of creating awareness on the cost and benefits, pros and cons of workplace romance for both the participants and the organization. If resources allow, workshops should also include external counsellors (so as to create a sense of privacy through counsellor-employee confidentiality) enabling employees to open up.
- Establish workplace electronic surveillance- if means permitting the organization through its Information Technology Department should establish surveillance systems such as closed circuit television (C.C.T.V) to monitor and reduce cases of public displays of affection between employees engaged in a workplace romance.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The ultimate question is how an organization through its H.R practitioners can manage workplace romance and prevent potential problems that may be presented. Firstly, it should be understood that H.R practitioners are the custodians of people issues hence the issue of workplace romance renders H.R practitioners as interested parties in this regard. Managing workplace romance will therefore provide standards that serve as benchmarks or reference points with which employees can make reference to. It is the role of H.R practitioners to create an enabling environment where employees' freedom of association and freedom of expression is guaranteed. This means that it is the duty of H.R professionals to establish an 'open door' approach that will encourage open communication for employees to interact with H.R professionals on issues of employee interest. This will be instrumental in removing the suspicion that employees have towards H.R professionals as they are regarded as liaisons between management and labor. Central to this is for H.R practitioners to uphold ethical practices such as guaranteeing confidentiality & maintaining the privacy of employee information such that the trust of H.R practitioners can be gained among the employees. Through building a strong open communication and trust network this will be the first port of call in managing issues of workplace romance which are very sensitive in nature.

It has been realized from the study at the local authority that workplace romance in itself is very complex given the various forms of the romantic relationships. It can, however, be noted that workplace romances have various consequences which are hinged of employee performance. It can be established that through workplace romance performance can either be enhanced or negatively affected. Essentially, were employee performance is affected, human resource practitioners become interested parties and this gives reason for H.R professionals to play a role in romantic relationships at work.

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