

## Compliance Today – May 2023



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### The era of the remote office romance and harassment

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by Gerry Zack

Office romances are nothing new. The compliance unit doesn't often get involved in investigating them unless they violate company policy or include allegations of harassment or other misconduct. Even then, they might be handled by human resources (HR) or others. But in some cases, compliance plays an integral role. And remote or hybrid work environments have contributed to an increased workload for HR and compliance.

A recent survey by ResumeBuilder.com found that one-third of workers who worked remotely for at least six months over the past three years had some form of office romance.<sup>[1]</sup> This figure is consistent with other surveys conducted in the last few years and is generally notably higher than pre-pandemic surveys.

About 70% of the people reporting office romances had these relationships with coworkers. But 36% said they had romances with clients, 27% with suppliers, and 21% with investors (yes, these add up to more than 100%, since some of our workers are apparently quite fond of office romances).

Many of the other results mirror what we've all read and seen before. Men are more apt to initiate an office romance than women; the manager-subordinate relationship remains well-represented in the data and is particularly tricky.

But when it comes to allegations of harassment, an issue that rarely existed before the pandemic clearly emerges. While 54% of people reporting harassment experienced this behavior at in-person events, 42% experienced it by text or calls, 35% while on a video call such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams, and a similar amount via instant messenger.

On the one hand, none of this should come as a surprise. Harassers will use whatever tool is at their disposal. Some people even speculate that the same boldness which enables people to post things on social media that they would never say to someone's face creates an environment in which harassing behavior is easier to engage via texts, instant messaging, or Zoom calls than in person.

Clearer policies and training that address newer or more frequently used communication methods are part of the solution. But, unfortunately, preparing for and managing more complex investigations is also essential. In place of two people telling very different stories and a frequent lack of witnesses, we now need tools for extracting data, video, and other bits of information from devices, piecing it together, and interpreting behaviors that are not always easy to interpret.

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<sup>1</sup> Resume Builder, "1 in 3 remote workers have started an 'office romance,'" updated February 13, 2023,

<https://www.resumebuilder.com/1-in-3-remote-workers-have-started-an-office-romance/>.

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