



## Love and Storage

*Facility romances are common but also present legal and personnel issues.*

*By Laura Fries*

Love and marriage, as the song tells us, goes together like a horse and carriage. But what about love and storage? The storage industry has long been known as a family business. It's not unusual to see husbands and wives and sweethearts working together as owners, managers or vendors.

Is there something about the business made for couples? Or, is it simply a continuing national trend of the blending of work and home life? While working together definitely has its perks, experts say it is important to be aware of and prepared for office romance, so that love doesn't become a liability.

Nationally, workplace romances are at an all-time high. Nearly 40 percent of CareerBuilder.com users surveyed in 2015 reported engaging in work-related romance. While it is no longer taboo to date at work, further studies show that most employees don't mind the idea of workplace romance as long as it doesn't involve a supervisor and subordinate, and as long as both parties are unmarried.

According to Scott Zucker, general counsel for the Self Storage Association, "As businesses grow, it is vital for

larger companies to have clear employee handbooks that define all operational issues in the company. One of those issues is how to address sexual harassment and who the employee can talk to if a problem occurs."

### Love Contract

As people, we naturally cheer for couples coming together. As a business, employers have to use their heads and their hearts. According to the Society for Human Resource Management, the number of businesses that have put workplace romance policies in place has doubled since 2005.

Some, called "love contracts," are signed by the involved parties declaring that the romance is consensual. Zucker said this is a topic where the answers range across the board.

"First, a company could choose to not have any policy on the issue," he explained. "They would still address protections for sexual harassment and discrimination in their handbook, but not address the question of dating. Second, a company could choose to allow it, as long as the parties

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*Above: Lisa Kaiser and Bradley Steele work at the Personal Mini Storage in Apopka, Florida.*

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disclose their relationship to supervisors (which will resolve the issue of consent to avoid harassment claims). Third, it can be allowed, but not between direct supervisors and their employees.

“One reason that this is important is where a supervisor has multiple employees and there are claims of favoritism between the supervised employees,” he added. “Lastly, it can be restricted per policy, which means that the violation will subject the employee to termination of their employment.”

Marc Smith, president of Personal Mini Storage in Orlando and chairman of SSA’s board of directors, said the company addresses sexual harassment in its policy manual, but does not have any rules against romance. He and his wife, Laurie Shader-Smith, work together as president and vice president, respectively.

Smith said lots of “teams” work for them, be it romantic couples, father-daughter, siblings, significant others, common-law couples or traditional “couples” and they haven’t had any issues.

“They enjoy working together, challenging each other, creating and attaining goals and that sense of teamwork accomplishment,” said Smith. Among the couples working at Mini Storage are Bill Bushman and Sharon Brudnak at the Clermont location, Bradley Steele and Lisa Kaiser in Apopka, and Evelyn Diaz and Glenn Curiel in Kissimmee. Virginia may be for lovers, but Florida self storage is apparently good for couples.

For Joni Schaefer, president of Carbondale Self Storage, in Carbondale, Illinois, the only issue in working as a couple is that a lot of contractors and handymen will assume her husband is the boss and address questions and comments to him. Even when her husband, Donn, tells them Joni

is the boss, some still will only defer to him. For Joni, a former civil servant, it feels a bit sexist.

While many have never had any workplace relationship headaches, legal advisors still suggest erring on the side of caution.

“Relationships in the workplace, although for the most part innocent and unoffending, do enhance the risk of liability to the company, especially if that romance goes bad,” Zucker explained. “The best general advice on the subject is to try to limit it. So if the company wants to address the issue in their policy handbook, they have the right to do so. It is not illegal to ban relationships in the workplace, but it is hard to enforce and potentially an impact to morale. The benefit of such a policy is the reduction in potential liability to the employer.”

## Boundaries and Balance

Legal problems are less of an issue than the potential for personal problems that can result from workplace romance. The key, says several storage couples, is creating boundaries and balance.

The Schaefers, although new to the storage industry, have been married for 30 years and have been working together in one form or another over that time. Joni said their success is knowing strengths and weaknesses in each other.

“I am the tank and he’s the butterfly,” said Joni. “He’s the creative thinking, and I am a logical person. Until you figure that out—what are your personality types—and work with it and not against it, you will butt heads. No matter if you are dealing with an employee or spouse, they will always do things differently than the way you do it. It will never be the same. So don’t look for someone doing it your way in a spouse or employee.”

Another key, according to the Schaefers, is to clearly establish job assignments.

“From a business model, if you don’t know who is doing what task, it doesn’t get done,” Joni said. “We call it swim lanes. I have a job, and I will do it. If you are in my lane, get out, I’m doing it. As long as everyone knows which lane they are in, things can get done. Sometimes we are asked to cross over into other lanes and that’s okay, as long as it is communicated.”

Joni and Donn also have some home rules to keep work life more balanced. The most important: They don’t talk business in the bedroom or on Sundays.

“Sometimes, if I think of a business idea while lying in bed, I will jump up and run out into the hall and tell him from the hall,” laughed Joni. Donn added, “You have to watch out, or the business will suck you in all of the time.”

Smith echoed the idea that the problem isn’t that love comes into the workplace; it’s that work comes into the home. “In a typical working environment, couples are able to separate work from home and obviously this is more



Joni and Donn Schaefer of Carbondale Self Storage, in Carbondale, Illinois

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difficult for resident managers. We strongly encourage our personnel to leave the site on their days off and to get away from the store,” said Smith.

Kristy and Matthew Olney didn’t know they were going to work together when they accepted their position as resident managers with Stor-All Gardnerville in Nevada.

“We were only recently married when we were offered the job, and hadn’t been living together long,” Kristy said. “It turned out to be perfect for us.”

As property managers, the Olneys not only work together, but live on site, making them a true example of blended work and home life. According to Kristy, however, it offers the best of both worlds, especially when companies are understanding of the relationship.

“Living on the property initially [lacked privacy],” she said. “We remember sitting in our living room watching the trucks and our relief managers go back and forth all day. The company we work for built privacy fences around our living quarters, which really helped us disconnect from the job when not working.”

They are also very adamant about separating work life from home life.

“Not doing so tends to be one of the reasons managers get burnt out, from what I understand,” Kristy



Evelyn Diaz and Glenn Curiel are employed at Personal Mini Storage’s Kissimmee location.

explained. “Naturally, if there was an after-hours emergency, we would have to handle it, but living at work has ultimately proved to not be an issue for us as resident managers. I don’t know that we would really be able to do this job to our fullest potential if we weren’t able to separate work from home. Matt and I have a really strong, healthy relationship and I believe that enables us to work better as a team.” ❖

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