SINGLE AND WORKING:
A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF WORKPLACE ROMANCE POLICIES

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ABSTRACT

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Workplace romances are becoming more prevalent in the workplace, resulting in the need for further exploration of the way in which management is responding to them. The purpose of this study is to examine workplace romance policies. To do so, a thematic content analysis was conducted. Nine categories were identified across 23 policies from various types and sizes of organizations. One of the most prominent findings was that many organizations are recommending employees communicate with their superiors in order to develop greater understanding of expectations. Results showed that consistency across organizations was lacking, suggesting need for further investigation into how policies are perceived by employees.

Keywords: Workplace romance, policies, organizational culture, interpersonal communication, content analysis
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The workplace provides a context for strangers to meet and get to know one another while they work together achieving common goals. Employees are exposed to a variety of individuals and while most people are reminded they will not like everyone with whom they work, what happens when they do more than like them? What happens when they fall in love?

As the workplace continues to evolve it is worthwhile to look at the changes that occur. In recent years work-life culture has changed in the United States largely in response to an economically tense time. As a result, employees are spending more and more time on the job (Binetti, 2007; Pierce, Byrne, & Aguinis, 1996; Riach & Wilson, 2007). This increase in time spent at work reduces the amount of free time to spend in social settings such as bars. Due to this dispersion of time, it seems plausible that individuals are more likely to meet future spouses in the workplace. Past research supports this claim, Margalioth, 2006), nearly one-third to one-half of romantic relationships start at work Karl & Sutton (2000) and Riach & Wilson (2007) both found that nearly half of relationships are starting at work. While workplace romances are not a new phenomenon, there appears to be a greater level of disclosure in recent years, thus providing management with increased reason to control potentially detrimental situations.
Managers approach workplace romance with caution. Legal implications, privacy violations, and sexual harassment claims all lead to heightened sensitivity regarding policy (Boyd, 2010; Rabin-Margalioth, 2006). Organizations are compelled to both protect themselves and provide a safe, comfortable environment for their employees.

Management’s approach to workplace romances can vary for many reasons. Research shows there is a difference in perception of workplace romance depending on the type of relationship. Past research has identified three types of workplace romances—hierarchical, lateral, and extramarital (Barrett & Nordstrom, 2011; Karl & Sutton, 2000; Pierce & Aguinis, 1997)—each offering a unique challenge to the employer. Similarly, the relationship itself can have an array of impacts on an organization, whether in productivity or perception. And finally, some relationships can be quite disruptive to the workplace.

In response to the increase in sensitivity regarding legal rights of employees the area of management of workplace romance needs to be researched further. It would be beneficial to take a systematic look at what policies are in existence. Through understanding the approach current managers are taking in regard to office policy surrounding interoffice romance, future management can better understand where gaps lie within policy discourse.

The purpose of this study is to examine fraternization, more specifically workplace romance policies. Conducting a content analysis on those policies can provide further understanding of how companies are approaching workplace romance and what communicative strategies are being implemented to protect both the
employees and the employer. Results of this study could help organizations develop a policy on workplace romances that effectively regulates behavior without infringing the rights of employees. One of the benefits of this type of study is the practical application of theory that it provides. The potential for practical implications of the results of this study are many. It is important for management to know which areas of office conduct are crucial for developing a sound policy. In addition, organizational standards may be found, showing trends of what is and is not usually covered by these types of policies, thus guiding organizations in constructing their own policies.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Generally speaking, sexual relations in the workplace have been considered taboo and at times ignored (Foley & Powell, 1999; Riach & Wilson, 2007). Despite this fact, workplace romance is—and probably always has been—prevalent. However, today it is more openly discussed (Lickey, Berry, & Whelan-Berry, 2009). Although management generally considers sexual relationships to be bad for the workplace (Rabin-Margalioth, 2006), nearly one-third to one-half of romantic relationships start at work (Karl & Sutton, 2000; Riach & Wilson, 2007). Research shows that most employees have been involved in or witnessed a workplace romance (Eastwick, Finkel, & Eagly, 2011; Riach & Wilson, 2007).

**Romantic Relationships in the Workplace**

Organizational culture has an impact on the formation of romantic relationships at work. There are specific cultural components that add to the increased likelihood of romances developing in the workplace. “Slow paced, conventional, traditional, conservative cultures typically discourage workplace romances, whereas fast-paced, action-oriented, dynamic, liberal cultures, which often contain an
atmosphere of intense pressure and activity that stimulates sexual excitement” (Pierce et al., p. 16). Some organizations encourage after office happy hours, which may increase the likelihood of sexual attraction (Pierce et al. 1996).

In addition to cultural influences, nontraditional work schedules are on the rise (Silverbrand, 2009). The number of hours spent at work has drastically increased in recent years leading to more time at work and less time for additional and separate social activities (Binetti, 2007; Pierce et al. 1996; Silverbrand, 2009). Similarly, over the last fifty years men and women have started working together more closely in the workplace (Boyd, 2010). Never separating from work has become a social norm with the introduction and rapid dissemination of smart phone use for work emails (Brown & Allegier, 1995; Dillard, 1987; Driscoll & Bova, 1980). This behavioral shift has resulted in an increase in relational development at work.

Pierce and Aguinis (1997) described three types of “corporate affairs:” nepotism, sexual harassment, and office romance. These relationships all blur the line between interpersonal relationships and workplace relationships. While there are a variety of close personal relationships that develop in the workplace, this paper examines romantic relationships that develop at work.

In order to develop a greater understanding of the development of workplace romances, the term must be defined. Researchers have described workplace romance as feelings of emotion, physical attraction, sharing of personal information, mutual caring, and respect (Lickey et al., 2009). Unlike flirting in the workplace, romance takes the relationship a step further often leading to sexual activity and repeated gatherings outside of work (Watkins, Smith, & Aquino, 2013). “Workplace romance
is defined as a mutually desired relationship that includes physical attraction between
two members of the same organization” (Lickey et al. 2009, p. 102). Additionally,
these relationships have been defined as two people working together that are
mutually attracted and that attraction is made known to others, resulting in some form
of change of behavior (Mainiero, 1986; Riach & Wilson, 2007).

It is important to specify that these relationships are identified as consensual
(Barrett & Nordstrom, 2011; Paul & Townsend, 1998; Pierce & Aguinis, 1996, 1997,
2009) and involving sexual intimacy. The mutual attraction is important to note in
order to separate workplace romance from sexual harassment (Bowes-Sperry &
Powell, 1999). This sexually intimate component is important because it creates a
specific distinction between workplace romance and workplace friendship. The
purpose of this study is to examine workplace romance and the management of
relationships within the workplace.

Policy on Romantic Relationship in the Workplace

Due to the pervasiveness of romance in the workplace there is a need for
policies regarding these types of relationships. Lickey et al. (2009) made
recommendations for content areas Human Resource (HR) personnel should include
in their policies. These suggestions are used as a starting point for examination of the
actual policies collected in this study and are explained in detail in the following
sections.

Context. There are many reasons as to why people enter into romantic
relationships. Theories of attraction suggest there are several aspects found in the
organizational setting that cultivates a culture from which relationships can emerge.
The workplace has been described as a place that “fosters interpersonal attraction” (Riach & Wilson, 2007, p.80). This is the result of various factors. Riach and Wilson further note that, “The later age for marriage, the higher proportion of unmarried people and high divorce rate all create an ever-replenishing courtship pool, leading to a sizeable minority of people meeting their partners at work” (p.80). Because of these factors, and human nature more generally, it is impossible to keep attraction from happening (Binetti, 2007; Boyd, 2010). The resulting challenge is how managers navigate workplace romance when coworkers cannot deny attraction.

The workplace serves as a “natural dating service” to many employees (Jones, 1999, p. 1057). Extra time spent at work means less time spent at the bar and other social settings (Cowan & Horan, 2014; Silverbrand, 2009; Hoffman, Clinebell, & Kilpatrick). This can lead to more employees turning to their coworkers as potential romantic partners. Working together for extended periods of time allows for people to get to know each other, which in turn leads to stronger attraction between the individuals (Boyd, 2010; Jones, 1999; Lickey et al., 2009). The workplace environment provides non-threatening exposure and no time constraint, allowing for the relationship to flourish (Lickey et al., 2009). In a culture where the typical 40-hour workweek is no longer the norm, people are spending more time at their jobs and more time with their coworkers with whom they are developing these intimate relationships.

The conditions of the workplace may also contribute to increased attraction between coworkers. Interdependence fosters liking (Eastwick et al. 2011). Proximity, intensity, similar work goals, feelings of success, willingness, and motivation are all
traits associated with increased liking and attraction (Hoffman et al. 1997; Riach & Wilson, 2007; Pierce et al., 1996). These conditions contribute to the likelihood of two employees being attracted to one another. Therefore, two employees who work together on a project are more likely to share a level of attraction due to their dependency on one another to successfully complete a task. Proximity refers to the closeness at which they work. Someone who shares an office with another person, or is consistently assigned to partnered work with another employee is more likely to be attracted to that partner.

The intensity of the workplace relationship also contributes to attraction because it can stir feelings of dependence and trust. “Most individuals have to deal with both the need for intimacy and the need for accomplishment. When the two needs conflict, they must be reconciled. Because the workplace is a particularly convenient setting for meeting attractive people of the opposite sex, individuals will frequently be faced with situations where they have to choose which need – if not both – they will act on” (Powell, 1986).

And finally, willingness and motivation to be in a relationship with one another may also contribute to the development of relationships. Day-to-day interactions in the workplace can result in unpreventable attraction between coworkers because of the combination of these factors and the want or need for someone with whom they share personal and professional stories.

The workplace allows for employees to experience their coworkers’ personality in a variety of capacities, thus providing opportunity to make judgments on their coworkers as potential romantic partners (Hoffman et al. 1997). Companies
hire people with similar characteristics, which may result in a heightened sense of attraction between coworkers due to similarities that were recognized during the interview process, thus resulting in both employees being hired (Luo & Zhang, 2009; Pierce, Byrne, & Aguinis, 1996; Foster, Foster, & Campbell, 2010). Organizations that are aware of the ways in which the organization may foster liking between colleagues may choose to include a section within their policies that identify they are aware these types of relationships may emerge. Knowing these contextual contributors to workplace romances led to the first research question.

RQ1 – What description, if any, of the context surrounding the emergence of workplace romances does the organization provide?

**Obligations of the organization.** Organizations have obligations to their employees. For example, providing a safe, comfortable workplace for its employees is one obligation. Generally speaking, past research argues that the personal lives of employees should not be one of management’s concerns and only becomes a concern when it impacts the organization or its other employees in any manner (Powell, 1986), especially if that impact is negative (Pierce et al., 1996). Studies show that managers are more likely to get involved when the workplace romance “warrants attention” (Barrett & Nordstrom, 2011). The organization must protect itself and its employees from any negative repercussions of workplace romances.

It is surprising then that seventy percent of employers do not have workplace romance policies (Barrett & Nordstrom, 2011; Cowan & Horan, 2014). Producing a workplace romance policy has been shown to assist in avoiding negative repercussions of relationships (Licney et al. 2009; Lieber, 2008). Without clear policies or guidelines, it is nearly impossible for managers to approach interoffice
romances proactively, leaving the organization at a disadvantage for how to deal with relationships when they occur (Lickey et al. 2009). With the establishment of policies the organization can be preemptive in addressing any issues that might arise.

Research shows that educating management on how to handle relationships that develop in the office can be beneficial to the organization (Lickey et al., 2009; Lieber, 2008). Handbooks are a good way for organizations to distribute valuable information to their employees about policies and acceptable behavior (Lieber, 2008).

The rising number of sexual harassment claims and sexual relationships in the workplace provide reason for managers to concern themselves with policy (Lickey et al. 2009). As previously mentioned, one of the obligations of the organization is to protect its employees and provide them with a safe and comfortable working environment. Protecting employees from sexual harassment leads to managers wanting to prevent the development of relationships (Boyd, 2010; Rabin-Margalioth, 2006). There is especially a heightened desire to prevent these relationships as a response to the negativity that is often the result of dissolved romances.

It is critical for managers to have a clear understanding of the importance of being fair and treating employees equally (Lickey et al., 2009). Past research has suggested that it may benefit an organization to establish a differentiation between hierarchical romances and peer romances (Lickey et al., 2009). Researchers have argued that supervisors should be held more responsible for a relationship of that nature (Binetti, 2007). The approach taken by management might also be impacted by the proximity in which two employees work with one another (Karl & Sutton, 2000). For example, two people who work in different departments may cause less of a
distraction than two people who work in the same department. These considerations are important because the organization also has a responsibility to the employees not involved in the relationship.

Workplace culture is defined as established norms in organizations that create the expectations for behaviors (Mainiero, 1986). An obligation of the organization might be to establish these types of norms by addressing what behavior is and is not acceptable during orientation and or their employee training program (Pierce & Aguinis, 2005). Additionally, Lickey et al. (2009) elaborated on the difference between implicit and explicit norms by saying,

Management may implicitly agree that romance, even in the workplace is none of its business. Management may realistically acknowledge that stopping workplace romance or sexual relationships is simply not possible or that its attempts to control or even prohibit workplace romance may push the relationship underground and, therefore, create even more legal complications if the workplace romance ends harshly, for example, making it difficult to prove the relationship was consensual (p. 104).

By identifying a strong cultural approach to relationships, the organization can implicitly create norms and expectations for behaviors, reinforcing the existing policies and developing a comfortable work environment for employees.

Not all relationships in the workplace are negative. Workplace friendship has a positive impact on the organization; so discouraging social encounters between coworkers need not be the goal (Lickey et al., 2009). Friendships can lead to more stable job commitment and better office morale (Pierce et al., 1996). Thus, organizational obligation does not entail discouraging all personal relationships from forming.
Positive romantic situations can have the same impact on the organization as workplace friendship as described previously such as, stable job commitment, and better office morale (Pierce et al., 1996). However, there is no way of knowing whether or not a relationship will last or end terribly. The most negative outcome for an organization stems from the relationship ending negatively, leaving one or more of the parties feeling great anger or need for vindication (Lickey et al., 2009). “Unlike non-workplace romances, workplace romances often involve two employees who are required to interact frequently with one another during daily work routines” (Pierce & Aguinis, 2009, p.198).

Binetti (2007) and Mainiero (1986) both considered organizational obligations to be valuable in policies because it establishes understanding that the organization is responsible for not only protecting itself, but also its employees. This need led to a second research question.

RQ2 – What are the organizational obligations, if any, identified in the workplace romance policy?

**Types of relationships.** In order to provide clear concise descriptions of expectations within workplace romance policies, Lickey et al. (2009) suggest the type of relationship must be identified and clearly explained. Clearer descriptions are necessary because of the varying impacts relationship types have on organizations as well as the difference in perception of the relationships. Three types of workplace romances have been identified as: lateral, hierarchical, and extramarital.

Lateral workplace romances exist between two members of the same company who are peers (Barrett & Nordstrom, 2011; Karl & Sutton, 2000; Pierce & Aguinis, 1997). Researchers describe this type of relationship as lateral because it occurs
across the organization along the same status of employees, they are also referred to as peer-to-peer relationships (Barrett & Nordstrom, 2011; Pierce & Aguinis, 1997). These relationships are considered less threatening to the organization because the employees involved are of equal levels therefore; there is no established power imbalance (Pierce & Aguinis, 1997).

Hierarchical workplace romance occurs between two employees of differing levels of employment (Barrett & Nordstrom, 2011; Jones, 1999; Karl & Sutton, 2000). For example, these relationships may exist between a supervisor and a subordinate or of people with varying levels of seniority at the organization. These relationships are seen more negatively by members of the organization due to the perception of potential motivations behind engaging in relationships with one’s superior or subordinate and the established power imbalance that exists between two people at differing levels of authority (Jones, 1999). An example of a negative effect hierarchal workplace romance can have on an organization is when two employees are involved in a hierarchal relationship that gets leaked to the news media resulting in what media refers to as a sex scandal (Lieber, 2008).

Extramarital workplace romances are the final type of relationship described by literature (Lickey et al., 2009). These relationships can be detrimental to an organization’s image and workplace morale because they occur between two members of an organization who are married to people other than their coworker with which they are having the romance. The impact different types of relationships have on the organization can vary and because of this it is important to differentiate
between the types of relationships that occur. This led to the development of a third research question.

RQ3 – What differences, if any, between the varying types of romantic relationships that occur in the workplace are identified in the policy?

**Obligation of the employee/organizational expectations.** There are expectations the organization sets forth for the employee in regard to what steps to take once a relationship has begun. These expectations may include reporting the romance to a supervisor, behaving in a professional and acceptable manor in the workplace, or entering responsible relationships with coworkers. Reporting specifically can impact the perception of the workplace romance because the way in which the relationship is made public has influence over the way in which it is received in the office (Cowan & Horan, 2014; Mainiero, 1986). Open and honest communication is important. Sneaking around and attempting to hide the relationship from employees can lead to trust issues within the workplace (Foster et al., 2010). A comprehensive policy may need to detail not only what romantic relationships are permitted within the company, but also what obligations an employee has for reporting a romantic relationship to the organization, if relevant, it may also spell out potential consequences from employees entering into certain types of romantic relationships in the workplace. The need for explanation of employee expectations contributed to the fourth research question.

RQ4 – What are the obligations of the employees involved in a workplace romance, if any, and or the organizational expectations of employees that participate in workplace romance, if any, described by the policy?

**Organizational actions.** Past research has indicated there are a variety of ways for an organization to approach workplace romance. Binetti (2007), Mainiero
and Jones (2013) and Silverbrand (2009) all state that the more prevalent approaches include, requiring the employee to report the relationship to the manager, having a “don’t ask don’t tell” attitude, ignoring the problem entirely, or requiring love contracts to limit liability.

Boyd (2010) and Rabin-Margalioth (2006) found there are three forms of organizational actions: (1) formal prohibition, where relationships are prohibited in the form of formal policy, (2) informal disapproval, which includes the use of organizational culture to encourage employees to avoid entering relationships with their coworkers, and (3) requiring a formal report of the relationship. Similarly, Lieber (2008) identified three approaches to workplace romance, strict prohibition, banning of supervisors dating any employees, and banning of supervisors dating employees under direct command.

As described previously, Dillard, Hale, & Sergin (1994) and Silverbrand, (2009) found that work and love do not mix. Rabin-Margalioth (2006) argue there is expectation that personal and professional space can exist as two separate spaces without overlapping. In comparison to home life, at work employees are encouraged to suppress their emotional side so that they can perform rationally. This idea of scientific management where employees are treated as machines, as opposed to people, is a dated attitude focused on production and not on employee relations (Silverbrand, 2009). Because of this attitude, a history of an ad hoc approach to romance exists for organizational action (Lickey, Berry, & Whelan-Berry, 2009).

Admittedly, it is hard to construct a universal policy because there are so many factors that impact workplace romances (Dillard et al. 2014). Most
organizations choose to ignore relationships rather than get involved (Hoffman et al. 1997) due to the fact that both negative and positive effects come from workplace romances and they would rather only involve themselves when absolutely necessary (Barrett & Nordstrom, 2011). Some past research recommends management not get involved until there is a negative implication for the organization (Karl & Sutton), while others advise taking a proactive approach (Barrett & Nordstrom, 2011).

Because the actions taken by organizations differ so drastically it is important that workplace policies make clear descriptions of their own approach (Lickey et al., 2009). The industry of the organization can impact the way in which organizations manage workplace romances (Lickey et al., 2009). For example, government organizations are more likely to have strict enforcement on their policies, especially due to their public nature (Boyd, 2010). Colleges and universities are likely to have more severe punishments in place for supervisor-subordinate relationships because of the power dynamic between professor and student. Policies provide a way for relationships to be monitored and managed so that employees and organizations are both protected.

One approach some organizations take to protect themselves and their employees from interoffice romance are love contracts. Lickey et al. (2009) characterize a love contract as follows:

A love contract is a legal document in which the organization and the employees involved acknowledge the romance. The contract also recognizes the continued professional and personal relationships, and the employees involved further state that the relationship is mutual and consensual and is not in violation of the organization’s sexual harassment policies (p. 112).
This type of contract can be used to reach agreement that if the relationship ends a certain protocol for reassignment will be followed (Pierce & Aguinis, 1997). Love contracts (Boyd, 2010; Hansen, 1998) can be perceived negatively by the employees because they may not want the employer to be that involved in their romantic relationships (Licney et al., 2009). One of the benefits to signing love contracts is that the relationship is identified early on and the expectations and consequences are clearly identified.

Most employees believe that employers have no business getting involved in employees’ personal lives (Jones, 1999; Karl & Sutton 2007). For example, Jones (1999) surveyed respondents to see how they perceived varying types of workplace romances and the way in which they felt management should handle such relationships. They found most of the participants felt management was only justified getting involved when the relationship resulted in negative repercussions for the organization directly. Similarly, Karl and Sutton (2007) sought to determine the level of fairness employees attribute to various policies. Taking no action toward the relationship and parties involved was the most preferred response. Counsel policy was the second most preferred method of dealing with relationships. Overall, participants reported that it was okay for management to get involved when warranted, the average response being a 6.6 on a 9-point scale of agreement.

However, some organizations feel as though romance has no place in organizational life, thus resulting in the banning of relationships entirely. “The topic of banning workplace romance appears to be very U.S.-centric, reflecting perhaps an inclination for U.S. managers to seek to keep intimacy and emotion out of the
workplace” (Boyd, 2010, p. 326). However, prohibiting office romances is not a reasonable answer (Jones, 1999; Lickey et al., 2009). While banning office romance might seem like a way prevent the negative consequences, such an approach seems unrealistic. The research on attraction reviewed earlier provides strong evidence that policies banning romantic relationships are not likely to be successful in fully preventing them. As Jones (1999) notes, “No rule or policy can prevent people from being attracted to one another or from falling in love” (p. 111).

Strict prohibition policies may result in counterproductive actions like forcing the relationships underground, thus increasing deception and likelihood for negative fallout. Forcing relationships into secrecy may actually have a negative impact on both the relationship and the organization involved (Foster et al., 2010). Similarly, Lickey et al. (2009) stated, “Prohibiting employee dating is too simplistic and does not serve the best interests of either the employee or the employer” (p. 111).

Ethical clauses or morality clauses about behavior may be an additional way to promote the organization’s attitude toward workplace romance (Boyd, 2010; Karl & Sutton, 2000). For example, a clause allowing for termination after being involved in unethical behavior may prevent married coworkers from becoming sexually or romantically involved with someone other than their spouse. Relationships where both parties are married are especially detrimental to the organization and should be dealt with immediately (Jones, 1999). These varying approaches to workplace romances in organizational settings led to the fifth research question.

RQ5 – What are the actions, if any, that will be taken by the organization toward those involved in a workplace romance?
Confidentiality and privacy. Organizations want to protect the confidentiality and privacy of their employees. Both areas are of interest to employees, because of this, Lickey et al. (2009) argue the protection of employee information be mentioned in workplace romance policies. An area of legal implication organizations encounter with respect to workplace romances involves employee privacy. Privacy issues arise when managers attempt to regulate interoffice romance (Binetti, 2007; Hoffman et al. 1997; Mainiero & Jones, 2013). Some employees feel as though it is a violation of their privacy for management to involve themselves in their personal lives. The Fourth and Fifth Amendments help protect employee privacy and prevent the crossing of any boundaries (Rabin & Margalioth, 2006). Similarly, it is of value to the organization to treat all employees equally and keep any form of disciplinary action or discussion about workplace romances between two employees confidential because employees already believe it is not any of the organization’s concern, and additionally not of any concern to the coworkers not involved in the relationship. This concern for employee privacy and confidentiality led to the sixth research question.

RQ6 – What confidentiality and privacy concerns, if any, are acknowledged in workplace romance policies?

Acceptable versus unacceptable behavior. Lickey et al. (2009) argue policies should be forward in identifying the difference between what is acceptable versus unacceptable behavior in the workplace. This can be applied to both romantic relationships as well as other office relationships (i.e., sexual harassment). The attitude that employees have toward those involved in the relationship can vary quite drastically and is heavily influenced by behavior within the workplace. When office
romances are distracting to those around them, the morale in the office may be affected and the relationship considered negative (Licney et al., 2009). Lack of professionalism and judgment toward behavior in the office can have a negative impact on the reputation of the company as well as job satisfaction of the employees not involved (Licney et al., 2009).

Organizational Justice Theory (Karl & Sutton, 2000; Pierce et al., 1996) can be used to explain the perception of those not involved in the relationship. First and foremost, the workplace should be perceived as a place of fairness. If employees feel as though they are at a disadvantage as the result of not being in a relationship, they are more likely to disapprove of the office romance.

The employees’ perception of the relationship and the relationship’s influence over the organization has to do with personality also, not every relationship is the same (Mainiero, 1986). Some relationships exist where behavior in the workplace is not significantly altered and this is preferred. Jealousy and rage, or the repeated actions of certain employees can influence perception and level of approval for the relationship (Licney et al., 2009). Coworker perception can also be influenced by the relationship they have with those involved (Bowes-Sperry & Powell, 1999; Mainiero, 1986). The more a coworker likes those involved in the relationship, the less likely they are to disapprove of the relationship or be as critical of the behaviors of those involved.

Interoffice romances can have a variety of effects on productivity in the office. When productivity suffers as a result of interoffice romance managers usually have to get involved. Cowan and Horan (2014) argued that there are limited positive
outcomes for productivity in the workplace when it comes to romance. They found
often times relationships within the workplace lead to gossip, which can distract
employees from their jobs. Paul and Townsend (1998) argue similarly. They found
that there are significant risks for the organization that result from workplace
romances. Some of those risks include sexual harassment, sharing of trade secrets,
lawsuits, and the creation of dysfunctional work environments for managers.

Not all workplace romances impact the organization negatively. When two
people are in a relationship the heightened energy level can be applied to their work,
therefore, resulting in higher productivity (Lickey et al., 2009). While there may be a
sudden spike in performance and productivity shortly following the initiation of a
workplace romance due to the novelty of the relationship. Nearly all relationships will
at some point have a negative effect on workplace productivity.

Research attributes lower productivity to several causes (Boyd, 2010; Lickey
et al., 2009). For example, there is a risk of lower productivity by those involved in
workplace romances because they may choose to spend their time at the office with
each other, rather than covering their assigned tasks (Boyd, 2010; Lickey et al.,
2009). This diversion from their work may result in employees being less productive.
Additionally, workplace romances may lead to “Conflicts of interest, favoritism, and
inefficiency resulting from spending time and energy on non-work, social activities,
and reduced morale or jealousy of coworkers” (Paul & Townsend, 1998, p. 5).

However, despite the initial reaction to deem attraction in the workplace as
negative, it can actually have positive results for the organization and its employees.
“Mild attractions are enjoyable and enhance work relationships and productivity”
whereas strong attractions can be detrimental to the flow of the workplace” (Riach & Wilson, 2007, p.80). Relationships can be beneficial to those involved because they can help lower stress and anxiety caused by employment (Eastwick et al., 2011).

Due to the risk on lower productivity some researchers claim that professionalism and de-sexualization are key to maintain productivity in the workplace and a successful work environment (Paul & Townsend, 1998; Silverbrand, 2009). There are ways management can maintain a professional work environment. Proper behavior should be expected of employees regardless of whether they are involved in a workplace romance or not. For example, two employees engaging in a romantic relationship should not use company provided technology, such as a cellphone, telephone, or email for personal use (Lickey et al., 2009). Management should reference this type of behavior in the workplace romance policy. Additionally, they should address public displays of affection as these can create an uncomfortable climate for other employees.

The type of love that occurs between employees may also impact the effect that relationship has on the workplace’s productivity. Scholars have identified various types of love. Some scholars break love down into two categories, infatuation (or lust) and romantic love (Pierce et al., 1996). Others have identified love types as eros (romantic/passionate) love, ludus (game) love, and storge (compassionate love) from friendship (Dillard et al., 1994; Foley & Powell, 1999). Romantic love tends to have a lower impact on the productivity level at work in comparison to the infatuation type of love that is associated with the desire to constantly be in the presence of one’s partner (Pierce et al., 1996). If two employees can control their urges while at work,
the relationship is less likely to be disruptive. It is those relationships that do not separate their social and work lives from one another that create distractions in the office. People enter romantic, or sexual, relationships for a variety of reasons. While research has shown that it is not necessarily possible to prevent attraction from occurring, there is reason to believe that the motivation behind entering such relationships has an impact on the organization, not just those involved.

The reason people choose to involve themselves in workplace romances impacts productivity and the perception of those relationships (Dillard, 1987). When the relationship is entered as the result of a job motive, it can be perceived negatively and completely unprofessional. The motive of the relationship should be separate from promotional or job security type reasons. When the reasons are seen as having to do with the job, there is cause for concern that unfair advantages are being given. Employees do not want workplace romances to impact those not involved (Brown & Allegier, 1995) it is when the relationship impacts those not involved that management needs to step in.

The various motives behind workplace romances include love motive, ego motive, job motive, and power motive (Mainiero, 1986; Paul & Townsend, 1998). Love motive refers to the employees desire to be romantically involved with a coworker for purely romantic reasons pertaining to their desire to find love (Mainiero, 1986; Paul & Townsend, 1998). Ego motive relates to the desire to boost or enhance one’s ego. A supervisor typically enters this type of relationship with a subordinate, usually with someone who is significantly younger than him or her or considered “out of his or her league.”
Job motive occurs when the parties involved are interested in bettering their career status. Seeking romantic relationships for job related reasons is not encouraged in the workplace because they are frequently perceived negatively. When employees perceive supervisor/subordinate relationships as being deliberatively planned to advance themselves in their career, it is associated with negativity (Clarke, 2006). Similar to the job motive, some employees might be interested in involving themselves romantically with coworkers for career rewards. Career rewards, described by Riach and Wilson (2007) as, “promotions, pay rises favourable job assignments, etc.” (p. 80) are perceived negatively by other employees. Partners might be motivated by power when they hope to benefit from his or her relationship through the increase of power. Acceptable and unacceptable workplace behaviors led to the development of the seventh research question.

RQ7 – What types of behaviors, if any, does the workplace romance policy identify as acceptable versus unacceptable for those in relationships?

Consequences. Organizations may have set consequences for engaging in workplace romances. Lickey et al. (2009) suggest those consequences be identified clearly in a workplace romance policy. The types of consequences can take several forms and two contributing factors to the consequence include gender and relationship-type.

Because of the difference in power between the genders there is a discrepancy in how consequences are received by men and women. In regard to gender, peers judge women more harshly for entering into interoffice romances (Devine & Markiewicz, 1990; Karl & Sutton, 2000; Powell, 2000) and gender has also been linked to the types of consequences received. Men tend to hold the higher positions,
therefore, sexual relationships at work might also impact gender and discrimination issues (Lickey et al., 2009). Because of men often holding the higher positions, women are more likely to lose their jobs as a result of being involved in interoffice romances. Therefore, “It is understandable that women disapprove more strongly than men about sexual intimacy entering the workplace. They rightfully see themselves as having the most to lose if it does end badly” (Powell, 1986, p. 34).

Additionally, the relationship type, as described earlier, can influence the way in which outsiders of the relationship respond to the relationship itself, thus may also contribute to the consequence resulting from a romantic relationship at work. Peer-to-peer relationships are most positively regarded. Extramarital and supervisor-subordinate relationships tend to be the most negative types of relationships for the organization and these involved and thus, often carry more strict consequences.

Supervisor-subordinate relationships are perceived negatively because of work-related influence that the subordinate may have due to his or her relationship (Foley & Powell, 1999; Lickey et al., 2009). Most employees say dating supervisors is negative behavior (Cowan & Horan, 2014). The blurring of the hierarchy is bad for business as well as the existence of power differences between those involved in the relationship (Cowan & Horan, 2014; Mainiero, 1986). Relationships with interns are also perceived incredibly negative because of the even more severe power imbalance (Lickey et al., 2009). Policies should therefore address the specific issues that result from hierarchal relationships.

Extramarital affairs are the worst for workplace perception and impact on peers (Bowes-Sperry & Powell, 1999; Mainiero, 1986). This is due to the obvious
moral and ethical implications for two already married individuals who are engaging in relations with someone other than their spouses, as well as for the co-worker (if the affair is covert) who may be put in a position where they have ethical choices about what to say to the spouse(s) who does not know about the affair. It is important for expectations of relationships to reflect the morality and values of the organization. This type of relationship does not reflect positive values and could negatively impact the entire image of the organization, thus it is likely to have more extreme consequences.

Once a relationship has formed, management can take different stances on how the relationship should be handled. Transfers and reprimands (Mainiero, 1986) are ways that managers can handle relationships once they’ve formed. It is suggested that employees need to understand the possible consequences for workplace romances before they occur; as a result, eighth research question was developed.

RQ8 – What consequences, if any, for entering a workplace romance are identified in the policy?

**Related policies.** Many types of policies indirectly regulate employee behaviors (i.e. workplace romance policy, code of conduct, fraternization policy, and sexual harassment policy). As identified, workplace romances can be tricky. There are a variety of legal implications that can result from interoffice romances. The risk of sexual harassment suits following the dissolution of a relationship, privacy law violations from managers trying to navigate interoffice romance, and discrimination suits stemming from inequality in disciplinary action, or suits filed over hostile or uncomfortable work environments are all ways interoffice romances can have a legal impact on an organization. Policies help organizations when romances result in legal
action (Lickey et al., 2009). They are a form of protection for the organization in other ways. For example, other management concerns may stem from the sharing of trade secrets between lovers. Workplace anxieties about confidentiality are a legitimate concern, however the sharing of confidential information may be covered by policies other than fraternization policies (Lickey et al., 2009). A similar overlap may play out in other policies as well. For this reason Lickey et al. (2009) suggest that connections between policies should be identified in workplace romance policies.

There are two major areas of legal concern where companies can use policies for protection, sexual harassment and discrimination suits.

The biggest risk for an organization is a relationship ending and resulting in sexual harassment (Jones, 1999; Lieber, 2008; Pierce & Aguinis, 2009). Sexual harassment is especially risky at the end of a hierarchal relationship (Pierce & Aguinis, 1997). “Although sexual harassment and office romances are essentially separate issues, boundaries may overlap if the attention is unwelcome, if the romance ends for one party but the other party persists, or if the romance ends badly and a sexual harassment claim is filed in retaliation” (Hoffman et al., 1997, p. 268).

Workplace policies (i.e. love contracts) protect the employer when the relationship ends (Binetti, 2007; Boyd, 2010; Paul & Townsend, 1998; Pierce & Aguinis, 2005). Due to these risks involved, the extent and specificity of the policies are important to examine (Binetti, 2007). Lieber (2008) argues that sexual harassment policies need to be a separate entity from workplace romance policies, while the two areas overlap frequently; they are different situations that should both be addressed independently of one another.
Discrimination suits may also cause trouble for organizations. Women are more likely than men to face negative repercussions following their involvement in a workplace romance (Foley & Powell, 1999; Riach & Wilson, 2007; Pierce & Aguinis, 1997). This discrimination may also result in legal action taken against the employer. Gender equality is important for managers trying to regulate workplace romances (Clarke, 2006). Similarly, suits filed by other employees claiming a hostile work environment or unfair advantages for those involved in workplace romances might emerge (Hoffman et al., 1997). These addressed legal issues can also be covered by policies other than workplace romance policies. These connections between other policies and workplace romance led to the ninth research question.

RQ9 – What links, if any, to other policies (i.e. sexual harassment policies, morality clauses, discrimination policies) are mentioned in the workplace romance policy?
CHAPTER 3

METHOD

In order to develop an understanding of the discourse surrounding interoffice romance policies, I conducted a content analysis of 23 policies.

Sample

I originally made requests for policies from 49 organizations, and 26 indicated they have no policy at present. So, this sample reflects responses from 23 companies, with 46.9% currently having written policy on the subject. The sample was comprised of 23 workplace romance policies. It was a convenience sample collected from friends’ and family members’ places of employment. It included both corporate and non-profit organizations, varying in size and industry. Table 1 provides a list of both the industry and size of each organization. The organizations that agreed to participate were promised that identifying information would not be used in this study. To protect their identities, only organizational size and industry were reported.

Coding Scheme

I performed a thematic content analysis using methods described by Holsti (1969) and Krippendorff (1980). To do so, rather than coding for specific words or language, I coded for themes that were found within the policies.
I chose to break the policy into units of coherent thoughts for coding purposes. As reported by Holsti (1969) this is a useful way of coding thoughts and ideas in content analyses. The drawback is that the boundaries of the units coded are more difficult to identify. However, with my second coder we shared 100% agreement on the units coded for the data we used in reliability coding. This result suggests that unit distinctions were reasonably clear in the data.

The categories related to each research question identified by Lickey et al. (2009) served as a starting point for developing a coding scheme for the data in this study. Lickey et al. argued that nine sections should exist in a properly developed workplace romance policy, which correspond with the research questions in this study. Those nine sections include: context, obligations of the organization, types of relationships, obligations of the employee/organizational expectations, organizational actions, confidentiality and privacy (protection of trade secrets), define acceptable and unacceptable behavior, specify consequences for failing to follow the policy, and identify links to other policies.

The only category suggested by Lickey et al. (2009) that was not followed as they suggested was specifying consequences for failing to follow policy. Instead, I coded it as consequences for entering a workplace romance because initially I felt as though organizational actions and consequences were separate categories without overlap. However, in working with my second-coder and coding the 23 policies I found that this was not the case, I found that organizational actions and consequences were nearly the same category and most units could be coded as both.
While coding for these nine categories, I identified emergent subcategories where they appeared in the data. To identify emergent codes, I first read through the 23 policies and highlighted the nine categories Lickey et al. (2009) recommended as they appeared throughout. Once the nine categories were highlighted I made a list of the items that appeared within each of those nine categories, from that list the emergent subcategories were created. After coding the themes throughout all 23 policies, I broke each category into emergent sub-categories then analyzed the data found, which included counting of thematic references across the 23 policies.

**Intercoder Reliability**

A second coder was used to establish intercoder reliability. Bakeman and Gottman (1986) recommend conducting intercoder reliability because reliability allows for the researcher to compare observer agreement against a protocol. This allows for researchers to create studies that are able to be replicated and to verify that additional coders are coding in the same manner as the researcher sees the data. I used Cohen’s Kappa instead of simple percent agreement for category classification because Cohen’s Kappa allows for me to calculate the agreement by acknowledging and removing the amount of agreement that is due to chance.

In many cases, researchers calculate a separate Kappa for each category in the coding scheme. However, computing Kappa for each content category was not feasible for my data, because each policy contained only a limited number of the content categories. Computing separate Kappas for each category would have required her to recode the entire data set, rather than the 10-20% sample that is typically done. Thus, I chose to compute a single Kappa across the entire set of
codes. She coded a total of four policies (17% of the data set) in order to develop intercoder reliability. Cohen’s Kappa was $\kappa = .87$ which Bakeman and Gottman (1986) report as an excellent Kappa score.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This study presented nine research questions designed to further understand the organizations’ practical application of recommendations made by Lickey et al. (2009) through a content analysis of 23 policies provided from various businesses. This section describes the results of the content analysis.

Overall, none of the 23 policies had all nine categories present. An average of 4.2 categories were found in each policy. Only one policy did not have any of the nine categories present. Eleven of the 23 policies had five or more categories present, with the most categories present in one policy being seven.

Research Question 1

The first research question asked, “What description, if any, of the context surrounding the emergence of workplace romance does the organization provide?” This research question attempted to identify any background information the organization provided as well as possible acknowledgment of the potential for development of relationships at work. After analysis of the sample, it was clear that this category did not need any additional subcategories as it addressed a broad approach to context and there were no significant sub-themes that emerged. They addressed the possibility of workplace romances, but did not provide specific details.
regarding situations that could occur. Examples of context include, “From time to 
time, personal relationships, romantic or otherwise, may exist or even develop 
between two people employed by the organization” (Policy 12). After coding the 23 
policies in the sample, results indicated that context was identified in nine of the 
policies.

**Research Question 2**

The second research question asked, “What are the organizational obligations, 
if any, identified in the workplace romance policy?” This research question attempted 
to identify any promises organizations made to their employees, reference to keeping 
a safe, harassment-free work environment, additional commitments to employees, and 
ways in which the company vowed to conduct itself. Organizational obligations 
appeared in eight of the 23 policies. Similarly to context, after coding, these 
obligations appeared more broadly in terms of reference and therefore, I chose to not 
divide into subcategories. Examples included, “Company is committed to maintaining 
a work environment free of unlawful discrimination or harassment for all employees” 
(Policy 1) and, “It is essential that we are committed to high standards of legal 
compliance and business ethics” (Policy7).

**Research Question 3**

The third research question asked, “What differences, if any, between the 
various types of romantic relationships that occur in the workplace are identified in 
the policy?” This research question attempted to identify differences between 
relationships as identified by organizations. For coding purposes, I broke this 
category into three subcategories suggested by previous research which included;
peer-to-peer, supervisor-subordinate, and extramarital. My goal was to identify if certain emphasis was put on various types of relations that occur between employees. In fourteen of the 23 policies relationship types were identified. The greatest emphasis was on supervisor-subordinate relationships appearing twenty times throughout the 14 policies. The next most frequently mentioned relationship type was peer-to-peer which were only mentioned four times, and finally extramarital, which appeared once across the sample.

**Research Question 4**

The fourth research question asked, “What are the obligations of the employees involved in a workplace romance, if any, and or the organizational expectations of employees that see and or participate in workplace romance, if any, described by the policy?” This research question attempted to identify the various ways in which organizations require their employees to behave. The emergent subcategories included reporting relationship to his or her manager or supervisor, obeying the policy, and signing a designated consensual relationship form. An overwhelmingly large number of references were made to reporting relationships, appearing thirty times in eighteen of the 23 policies. Obeying the policy and signing a consensual relationship form only appeared once each.

**Research Question 5**

The fifth research question asked, “What are the actions, if any, that will be taken by the organization toward those involved in a workplace romance?” This research question attempted to identify specific descriptions of what the management will do in response to the development of relationships. This category did not include
consequences for entering relationships necessarily, as described later in research question eight, these two categories were the most challenging to differentiate between. In discussing the differences with my second-coder, she made it clear that the way in which I was describing the two categories were too similar. To clarify, I elaborated that specifically, organizational actions looked to describe the steps taken by management and or supervisors. For example, “The Company may reassign or terminate one or more of the employees involved or take other appropriate action” (Policy 1). Organizational actions appeared in 11 of the 23 policies. The two most frequent actions found included transfer and termination.

**Research Question 6**

The sixth research question asked, “What confidentiality and privacy concerns, if any, are acknowledged in workplace romance policies?” This research question attempted to identify acknowledgment of privacy and confidentiality issues. It was broken into two subcategories: intrusion of personal privacy, and protecting of confidential information. This category appeared in five of the 23 policies and both subcategories occurred four times separately, across different policies. Examples of these two subcategories include, “The intent is not to invade privacy or direct anyone’s personal life outside of work, but to make sure that the workplace is a comfortable one for all” (Policy 2) and “We will keep that information confidential and release it only to those who have a legitimate need to know” (Policy 9).

**Research Question 7**

The seventh research question asked, “What types of behaviors, if any, does the workplace romance policy identify as acceptable versus unacceptable for those in
relationships?” This research question attempted to identify the various behaviors that are explicitly reported in policies. The subcategories were broken down into acceptable and unacceptable. These examples referenced specific behaviors that could potentially occur in the workplace. Twelve of the 23 policies had descriptions of behaviors that were either acceptable or unacceptable. More often the policies reported unacceptable behaviors, with twenty-seven occurrences, whereas only four mentions of acceptable behaviors. An example of unacceptable behavior included “Colleagues are strictly prohibited from engaging in physical contact that would in any way be deemed inappropriate by a reasonable person while anywhere on company premises, whether during working hours or not” (Policy 17). An example of acceptable behavior included, “Does not refer to occasional compliments or other generally acceptable social behavior” (Policy 17).

**Research Question 8**

The eighth research question initially asked, “What consequences, if any, for entering a workplace romance are identified in the policy?” This research question attempted to identify the aftermath, actions following acknowledgment of a relationship, and consequences for entering a relationship. However, after analyzing the data with my second coder it was evident that referring to consequences made identifying this particular category more challenging. For coding purposes I chose to reword this category as “penalties.” Thus, I revised my research approach to ask, “What penalties, if any, for entering a workplace romance are identified in the policy?” This question sought to identify the potential penalties for entering a relationship with a colleague. The subcategories included, transfer, terminate, and no
penalty. Twelve of the 23 policies reported some type of penalty for a workplace romance. Being terminated was the predominately penalty with seventeen mentions, closely followed by being transferred with fifteen mentions. Across all 12 policies that included mentioning termination, it was not a first resort. Termination was provided as the penalty in regard to being able to find another suitable alternative from removing one of the members of the relationship from the current work situation. More frequently, this was linked to hierarchal relationships, where organizations did not want supervisors to remain in power over their partner. Only three policies mentioned having no penalty for a workplace romance. These policies stated that the relationship would be permitted to continue without any penalty as long as they abided by the further established guidelines. Two of the three policies that mentioned not having penalties were from the healthcare industry, and the third was from publishing. I found nothing about these employers that would explain the difference as to why they chose to disclose they would allow the relationship to continue.

**Research Question 9**

The ninth research question asked, “What links, if any, to other policies (i.e. sexual harassment policies, morality clauses, discrimination policies) are mentioned in the workplace romance policy?” This research question attempted to identify mentions of reference to additional policies. It is important to note that for coding purposes this specifically referred to written policies and did not include suggestions for future communication between management and supervisors. This often stated something along the lines of “Please see ____________ for further explanation.”
Nine of the 23 policies advised their employees to seek further explanation from additional policies or guides. The subcategories included; sexual harassment, code of conduct, “other” policies, employee manual, and counseling policy. The most prevalent policy suggested for further reference was the code of conduct as it was mentioned five times.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine workplace romance policies that exist in various organizations. A content analysis was conducted of 23 policies implemented by a variety of organizations in differing industries. In doing so, greater understanding of how managers are approaching workplace romance and what communicative strategies employers are using to protect themselves and their employees was found. In analysis of the sample, I discovered several findings; these findings will be discussed further below.

Practical Applications

One of the most important contributions a study such as this one makes is examining the practical application of theory. Rather than furthering the study of theory for the sake of theory itself, this study takes a practical approach to the study of workplace romances by taking past scholarship and using it as a lens to view the way in which organizations approach this topic in their everyday practice.

Need for More Policies

Out of the 49 organizations contacted to participate in the study, 26 of them did not have what they considered workplace romance policies, providing reason to believe workplace romance policies are still an area in which organizations are
growing. After examining the 23 policies that participated, it was interesting to see that while representatives from each company submitted all of these documents as “workplace romance policies,” only two of the documents were separate policies. The other twenty-one were policies that existed within a different policy, code, or manual such as the code of conduct or sexual harassment policy. There was also one policy that was submitted that did not include any of the nine categories as identified by Lickey et al. (2009). The policy itself did not include anything I found relevant to workplace romances, yet the HR representative for that particular company reported that was where workplace romances were addressed. The diverse content of workplace policies suggests a need for consistency across organizations.

**Consistency**

One finding from the content analysis was the lack of consistency across the sample. Despite being a relatively small sample, there were similar industries represented, and a variety of organizational sizes, however, there was not a single category that existed in every policy. While trends emerged, it is hard to argue that any real consistency was found across workplace romance policies. If this sample is representative of all policies across the corporate and non-profit sectors, then it would be safe to conclude that no standard for workplace romance policies is in place. This brings up the question of whether there should be a set of consistent policies used in all organizations, or whether policy needs to be more company and industry specific. Were these the right categories to look for within workplace romance policies?

I suggest that consistency is desirable in this type of policy. Consistency would allow for organizational norms to transcend companies. In the current job
market, people are changing jobs more frequently rather than staying in the same organization throughout their entire careers. If a more consistent standard was established, eliminating large variations, there may be less ambiguity when changing from one organization to the next. I argue that this type of standard may alleviate misunderstanding while encouraging a better expectation of what is appropriate for the workplace. As mentioned, attraction may not be able to be prevented, but it can still be managed in a professional manner with the correct guidelines. I think organizations should establish a common core of workplace romance expectations that then could be adapted by specific industries accordingly. I think consistency is necessary because even in varying workplace environments (i.e. virtual teams) there are some of the same issues that may arise from romance between coworkers, therefore, there are certain foundational concepts that could exist across all organizations.

**Foundation.** In suggesting consistency across organizations, two areas emerged as a strong foundation for where organizations might choose as a starting point in creating a core workplace romance policy from which independent industries could adapt to accordingly. The first being the need for employees to report to management when a relationship begins and the second being the actions that the organization will take following the development of a relationship. It is important for employees to know what is expected of them and what can be expected from their employers in regard to dealing with the relationship.

**Confound RQ5 & RQ8.** After analyzing the content analysis the overlap between Research Question Five and Research Question Eight was made evident. In
discussion with my second coder, it was clear that combining the two categories might provide useful. Research Question Five sought to identify the organizational actions taken following the development of a relationship between coworkers and Research Question Eight sought to identify the consequences for entering such a relationship. I found that these were the same in nearly all policies in which they were identified. The subcategories that emerged from both included transfer, termination, and no penalty. Lickey et al. (2009) had intended the eighth category to refer to consequences for failure to report, however, no such information existed in the sample used for this study.

Termination was an interesting subcategory because, despite it appearing most frequently, it was never reported as the first line of defense for organizations. When termination was referenced it was always in conjunction with prior failed steps. For example, if one of the members of the relationship was unable to be transferred out of the department, termination would be a last resort.

**Reporting.** As mentioned previously, reporting was a significant requirement made by most of the policies in which employee obligations were identified as a category. Research question four examined employee obligations. It sought to understand the most prevalent requirements organizations have for those employees who choose to enter into a workplace romance. The most prominent responsibility identified by the policies in the sample was to report the relationship to a manager or supervisor. This requirement contributes to the theme discussed later in regard to an open communication channel.
The organizations had a large interest in identifying when these relationships occur so that management is able to adjust the workplace accordingly. More often than not the process after reporting was to make sure there was no risk for unethical behavior in the workplace, usually resulting in one of the employees being transferred or relocated. This process shows that organizations are not trying to dictate who can and cannot fall in love, however it shows their attempt to remove the relational component from the workplace by allowing the couple to keep their relationship, but not let it interfere with their work tasks.

One interesting component about reporting that must be considered in the strategy used by organizations to identify when a relationship has progressed to the point that reporting is necessary. This could potentially become problematic for organizations because it could create a sense of shame in the workplace if it is required too early in the relationship (potentially casting a negative light on someone who had several short-term relationships within the organization) and could also develop into a violation of privacy concern (should a company know about a first date?). It is important for organizations that require reporting to articulate at which point the relationship is considered of significance to require reporting. Difficulties can arise in reporting, since relationships are often not clearly defined or understood by participants, it may not be clear to participants at what point a relationship has developed and should be reported. While my research did not provide the answer to the question of what counts, as reportable, future research should seek identify when a relationship has reached the point of needing to be reported.
**Relationship Type.** Identifying a differentiation between the types of relationships employees may enter is important in workplace romance policies because often supervisor-subordinate relationships required specific action to be taken. Research question three was looking for identification of difference between relationship types that may occur within the workplace. An overwhelming number of policies identified more attention being paid to supervisor-subordinate relationships. This was to be expected due to the heightened risk when supervisors are involved with subordinates. These types of relationships have been found to be bad for morale and potentially risky for business, thus it is reasonable to assume that there would be an increased interest in monitoring and regulating these relationships. I would make the argument that this is a good practice for organizations to include in their policies. In agreement with past research, supervisor-subordinate relationships are the most risky for an organization and therefore need to be explicitly restricted in the policy. Peer-to-peer relationships could potentially be better managed implicitly by establishing strong cultural norms for proper workplace behavior. This may be better suited in discussion of what behaviors are and are not permitted in the workplace.

**Behavior.** Behavior is an important category in which organizations should take interest in. Research question seven sought to identify the various behaviors organizations explicitly described as acceptable or unacceptable. Most of the behaviors identified were strictly prohibited. This corresponds to the desire of the management to regulate behavior as to provide a comfortable work environment free from harassment. Again, it is a way for management to say that becoming involved romantically with a coworker is acceptable, as long as the behavior remains
professional. It is clear that organizations are not focused on preventing or ending romantic relationships that develop at work. Rather, they are invested in protecting the good of the company by maintaining a professional work culture.

**Context.** In order to adjust to the shift in workplace culture, I think organizations should acknowledge the chance of romantic relationship development in the workplace. Research question one asked what kind of context, if any, was provided in workplace romance policies. Results showed this category appeared in nine of the 23 policies. Including context suggests that the organization does understand that relationships happen and that it is unrealistic to believe some employees will not be attracted to one another. Past research suggested that due to the cultural shift and the increase in workplace romances this is to be expected. However, due to the small number of policies that this category appeared in, it seems as though there is room for growth in this particular category. I suggest more organizations make an effort to identify awareness that romantic relationships develop within the workplace. I think by acknowledging that the relationships could potentially arise, companies are preparing their employees to feel comfortable in discussing relationships with their superiors. When organizations do not acknowledge the potential for romantic relationship development, it may come across to employees as being taboo and therefore, preventing employees from being forthcoming about relationship.

**Open Communication**

Open communication is one of the emergent themes found in analysis of all 23 policies. Despite not having looked specifically for areas where policies referenced
open communication or communication channels, it was evident through the analysis that nearly all of these policies made reference to the importance of continuing discussion and communication with management and supervisors. As mentioned previously, the most prevalent employee obligation was to report the development or existence of relationships to management. While this is important, and does foster the idea of communicating about relationships, nearly every policy took it step a further by explicitly recommending the continuation of conversation about workplace romances.

Suggesting and guiding employees to ask questions and spark discussion regarding policy and workplace relationships was abundant. I argue that this may be the most crucial component of a workplace romance policy. Encouraging free-flowing communication between all levels of employees can create a culture that is comfortable and safe for employees, an environment where employees do not feel the need to hide or lie about their relationships, thus creating more distraction than necessary. In so many aspects of life communication is key. It can generate understanding and eliminate risk of misinformation. When managers openly discuss the policy with employees, it is easier to disseminate that information to appropriate audiences, thus benefiting the organization in the long run.

**Limitations**

Despite having made contribution to both the literature regarding workplace romance policies and the application of theory to constructing policies, this study did have some limitations.
The first limitation of this study is the small convenience sample, being made up of only 23 policies that were collected using personal connections. The lack of consistency or patterns found may be due to the limited number of policies from each industry type. Thus, a larger sample would be helpful in generalizing the results from this study.

Additionally, the second limitation to this study stems from the methods used to analyze data. While content analysis provides an excellent description of what is going on in workplace romance policies, it cannot tell why the policies contain the information that they do. This information could be a helpful supplement for better understanding the policies examined. My recommendations for future research and how this could be investigated further are in the following section.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

There are several areas that could still use further exploration. First, it is important that more content analyses be conducted. It is critical that scholars not only discuss theory, but also explore as to how that theory intersects with practice. This study offered a nice entry into this area with an examination of 23 of the policies. Extending this research by looking at a larger array of policies, in particular, larger samples from individual industries could yield further insights.

A second area for future research is to pair content analysis with survey data to generate a level of understanding about employee perception regarding the workplace romance policy. While this study provides explanation as to what is included, there is no indication as to how employees respond to these policies. It may also benefit scholarship to conduct research in order to develop a better understanding
about the level of compliance with these policies and what sorts of policies and cultures encourage compliance. A final area for future research includes how policies are created or chosen from managements’ standpoint.
REFERENCES


## APPENDIX

Table 1

*Industry, Size, and Presence of Nine Categories in Policies Sample*

<table>
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