

Helen Gurley Brown says that office romance is alive and well.



In 1962, Helen Gurley Brown published the scandalous *Sex and the Single Girl: The Unmarried Woman's Guide to Men*; two years later, she brought forth *Sex and the Office*, an audacious guide to navigating the choppy waters of workplace romance that remains one of the definitive works on the subject. Brown was named editor of *Cosmopolitan* in 1965 and stayed for thirty-two years. At 84, she is editor-in-chief of *Cosmopolitan International Editions* and continues to publish: 2004 saw a new book, *Dear Pussycat: Mash Notes and Missives from the Desk of Cosmopolitan's Legendary Editor*—and the republication of the still-daring *Sex and the Office*.

—MATTHEW BUDMAN

First question, one straight from *Sex and the Office*: Do bosses make lousy lovers?

I certainly wouldn't say that *all* bosses make lousy lovers. There might be some bosses who are not very good lovers, and others who are competent and thrilling.

What was the reaction to the book at the time you wrote it?

It didn't kick up a horrible row. After *Sex and the Single Girl*, people were used to me saying outrageous things, and since I was writing from experience and the experience of my girlfriends, most of my observations were realistic.

In 1964, you wrote: "There is no more sex at the office now than there was twenty-five years ago." Is there more sex at the office in 2006?

Maybe *sex* is too strong a noun to use—sex is when you actually get into bed. I would conjecture—not being the world's leading research authority—that there are more personal relationships going on in the office, because women are more equal partners. Today, it isn't just a man picking on some little scruffy girl in his office and making a play for her—things are more equal. The woman might be picking on some little scruffy man and making a play for him! My opinion is that there are more personal relationships that may end up in a sexual situation than there have ever been in the past.

Back then, you urged housewives to enter the workforce and thereby become more exciting to their husbands. They took your advice. How has that changed the dynamic in the office?

Women have better jobs, we get the same money, we can be managers and on boards of directors, we can run companies, and if we want to take advantage of some of the same prerogatives as men have always had, we can.

My wife was interested to hear that, "Practically every man in an office has had, is having, or is capable of having an affair at some time in his life" and that, "The girl a married man 'succumbs' to is forty-nine times out of fifty . . . a girl he has met through his work." She wasn't too keen on me going to the office the next morning.

I guess it's a pretty strong statement to say that every man is vulnerable. It just depends upon the people you're associating with. Of course you may be surrounded by people who are not very interesting, but in most companies there are people of the opposite sex whom you might find attractive. Whether you do anything about it is something else again. There are millions of workers who don't go the route that I'm talking about—they do their work and go home.

In *Sex and the Office*, you seem very much a proponent of the office affair.

Romance doesn't have to be bad for business; I cannot see any deleterious effect of two people being

involved romantically if they don't let it interfere with their work. I know a lot of people who have been or are involved with somebody in their office, and it depends on how they conduct it: They can be idiotic and spend too much time together at work, or they can be grown-up and professional and sophisticated and not pay attention to each other in the office. They should see each other at lunchtime or at night, away from the office. Whether one of them is married may have something to do with it, but we're not talking about that right this minute.

Sure, during the daytime, they have to be a little discreet and a little smart. But to say that you can't use the people you work with as romantic possibilities—that's such a waste! They're the people you're with eight hours a day. Where else are you supposed to meet people but the office? You can't pick them up at a ballpark, or from the next table at a restaurant—they're already with somebody. It isn't so easy to meet new romantic friends; I'm spending a great deal of my life trying to fix my uncommitted girlfriends up with somebody. So there they are—they're in the office, they're available, they're there. Why let them go to waste?

Does the Hearst Corp. have guidelines on office relationships?

They have not had any official poli-

Questioning Authority

cy about romances in the office. Granted, we have lots more women working on magazines than we do men, so there may not be enough men to go around. But I think the bosses at Hearst would say what I say: Do your work, honey, do a good job, be professional, be terrific at what you do, and your personal life is up to you—we can't interfere.

A lot of companies do have policies, to prevent problems with favoritism and morale. But you insist that, "An office affair doesn't necessarily undermine office morale" and that "most sex at the office concerns only the people it concerns."

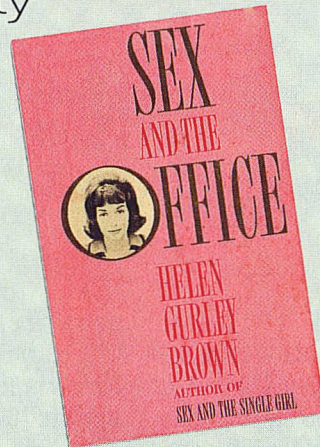
To me it's idiotic to have rules against relationships with co-workers. Again, what matters is the work that is produced, in terms of achievement, reliability, responsibility, contribution to the profit of the company. If those things are kept firmly in mind and you're good at your work, the personal situation is irrelevant.

Is it pointless for companies to institute guidelines about what's appropriate?

We are all sexual creatures, and we respond to people of the opposite sex, wherever we are. That stuff is going to go on regardless of the rules, and I don't think it has to be deleterious. Now, somebody might say that a boss treats a particular woman better because he's involved with her romantically, and such an accusation might be true, but if he's a smart boss and wants to keep his job, he won't let that happen. Favoritism should not be apparent just because people are going out on dates with each other.

In 1964, you advised women to dress "beautifully" for the office, partly because it was assumed that the male executives would be leaving their plain wives at home. Now that most women are part of the workforce, is how one dresses as important as it used to be?

Yes. You should look as good as you can, but you don't have to spend an hour in front of the mirror getting all fixed up. You don't have to be



dressed up in Donna Karan or Chanel; your outfits don't have to be sexually inviting, with a low-cut neck or a miniskirt. Nearly every woman these days wears pants to work—usually a dark color, navy blue or charcoal gray or black, and a sweater or a blouse or a jacket on top. Pants are really the office uniform, and they can look wonderful and beautiful and attractive, or they can be tacky. It just depends. Of course, we're talking about offices, and there are lots of other kinds of workplaces: universities, libraries, television stations. People dress differently in different settings.

I live on a college campus, and people here wear, um, sweatpants.

But it's different when you go to your office, right?

Not as different as one might expect, but

Do your work,
honey, do a
good job, be
professional, be
terrific at what
you do, and
your personal life
is up to you.

yes. I assume that at *Cosmopolitan* no one looks tacky.

Our challenge is that we don't have any men; the staff is entirely composed of women—although there are plenty of male executives in the company, and the women might be making a play for some of them.

Now, even though *Sex and the Office* says upbeat things about office romances, you caution: "When an affair is over, it usually isn't possible to continue to work in the same office. It will be you who must get the new job, too. That's protocol." Losing one's job is a pretty serious caveat.

I don't think that is categorically true. At Hearst, I have seen romances take place and then end, and nobody left the company. They may not want the romance to interfere with their success in the job.

Was it that way in 1964?

I guess I wouldn't even say it was true at that time. I think people just went on their way after the affair ended.

But it's in your book!

That someone had to leave the company? I seem to have changed my mind.

You're entitled.

Well, maybe at that time a sexual affair at the office was so serious that when it was over, one person had to get lost. But I don't think it's true anymore.

Is there any advice about office romance that you regret giving?

I read *Sex and the Office* last year, carefully, every line, before I said yes to Barricade Books when they wanted to republish it. I thought, "If this stuff is silly, if it's not applicable any longer, if it's out of date, if it's fake or phony, I don't want them to republish that book." But I did not have that reaction. I found *Sex and the Office* still perfectly viable. I wouldn't do anything differently. ♦