

## Does your ‘work spouse’ get a Valentine?

Heavy workloads mean close bonds at work — sometimes too close



NBC Universal  
Characters played by Tina Fey and Alec Baldwin share intimate details of their lives at the office on "30 Rock." In real life, that can lead to problems.



By **Eve Tahmincioglu**

msnbc.com contributor

updated 2/14/2011 7:36:32 AM ET

Will you be sending a Valentine to your “work spouse” today?

Colin Sokolowski, a public relations director for a suburban St. Paul, Minn., school district, realized recently he has a “work spouse” when he locked his keys in his car and co-worker Bridget Peterson, a finance manager for the district, came to his rescue.

“Bridget called AAA and assured me that her membership services would apply to my car as long as she stayed with me and signed for [the service],” he said.

“Acting remarkably similar to my real wife, she

even told the tow truck guy not to scratch my car,” he added. “Clearly, she was ripping me in my moment of need. I drive a 1998 sedan with 145,000 miles and 155,000 scratches on it.”

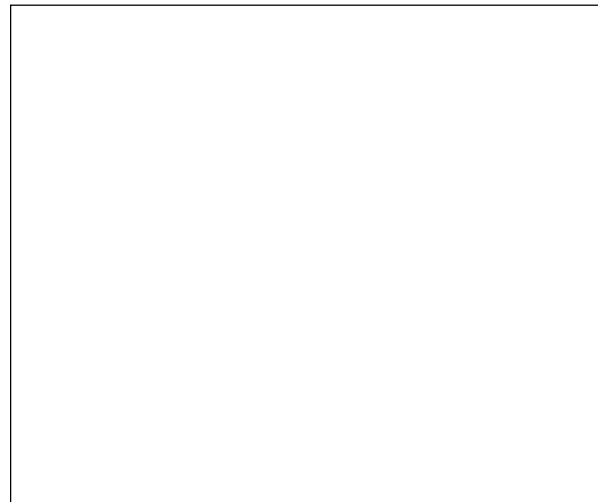
Sokolowski — who has a real wife of 15 years named Kelly — is so open about his work-spouse relationship that he blogs about his it on his website [AccidentalAdult.com](http://AccidentalAdult.com) under the heading, “My Work Wife.”

Of course, Peterson, who is also married, had to approve the blog before it ran.

“He asked me what I thought before he posted it,” she explained. “It was really funny.”

Colin and Peterson won’t be sending each other Valentines today because their relationship is strictly platonic and mainly about camaraderie at work, they said. But theirs is the type of workplace connection that some workers seek, given how much time and energy people put into their jobs these days.

advertisement



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™



And it can be fairly common.

[Readers, did the economy cause you to delay filing for divorce?](#)

An OfficeMax survey released this month found that 50 percent of those polled who have a “significant other” also “share a relationship with a ‘work wife’ or ‘work husband.’” Another recent study by Captivate Networks, a digital media solutions company, reported that 65 percent of employees say they currently work, or used to work, alongside their spouse.

One reason for these types of workplace connections is that the long economic slowdown has led to greater workloads for employees, many of whom naturally vent their frustrations to co-workers, said Treivor Branch, a workplace issues consultant in Milford, Conn.

“We form bonds with people. It’s natural,” he said. And most of the work-spouse relationships she’s been privy to have bonds that are about friendship and nothing more, Branch added.

Indeed, nine out of 10 work spouse relationships are strictly platonic, said Scott Marden, Captivate’s research director. Employees most likely to have such workplace friendships are those who work in marketing, sales and human resources, he said. Those least likely work in IT and finance, he added.

It’s unclear when the phrase “work spouse” was coined, but the label, along with the terms “work wife” and “work husband,” can be found on many social media websites. One employee recently tweeted about her “work husband” helping to pick out just the right shade of nail polish. Another told everyone on

FourSquare that he was having lunch with his “work wife” at a pub. There’s even a Facebook fan page called “My Work Spouse” with the description: “Not your soul mate. Your cell mate.”

These workplace bonds can be positive if they don’t get too close, said Sharon Gilcrest O’Neill, a marriage psychotherapist and author of “A Short Guide to a Happy Marriage.”

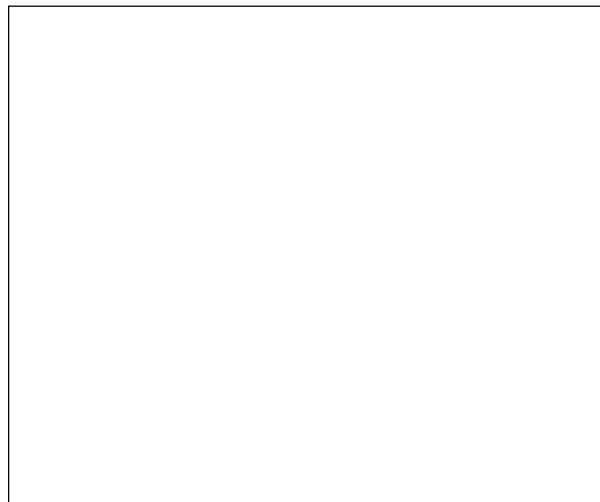
“It may sound great to have this support at the office, but anything can happen, especially when people end up crossing boundaries,” she said.

[Looking for love? Try the next cubicle](#)

One of O’Neill’s patients wound up in therapy with his wife because his work-spouse relationship went too far. The husband was a doctor and he was very close to a physicians’ assistant at work, eating lunch with her every day and discussing how unhappy he was in his marriage.

“That really crosses over boundaries when you’re talking about your home life,” she said. “That’s where it gets very tricky.”

advertisement



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™



According to the Captivate work-spouse study, 63 percent of respondents discussed health issues with a colleague, while 59 percent said they talked about at-home problems and 35 percent discussed their sex lives.

And the OfficeMax survey reported that “56 percent of those in this situation admit they shared more or the same amount of personal information with their work spouse as they did with their significant other.”

Indulging in such personal discussions with co-workers can be a slippery slope, O’Neill said.

“The person starts believing ‘this other person at work really gets me, they understand and they’re empathetic,’” she said.

“If there’s any unconscious longing for that person” these feelings can become problematic, she added.

While the doctor O’Neill treated in therapy committed to working on his marriage and distanced himself from his “work wife,” the assistant was annoyed because he wasn’t her best pal anymore.

A jilted work spouse is one reason why Jonathan Segal, an employment attorney for Duane Morris in Philadelphia, is leery of such work bonds.

“I’m not crazy about the label from a legal perspective because the label ‘spouse’ can have a romantic connotation,” he said. “It also can create exclusionary issues; not everyone can be everybody’s spouse.”

It can be even more problematic if a male manager and female underling (or vice versa),

are work spouses, he said. If the spouses “divorce” (decide not to be friends anymore) and one employee feels he or she wasn’t treated fairly at work in some way, it could lead to sexual harassment claims. And what better defense, he continued, than saying the manager called her his work spouse.

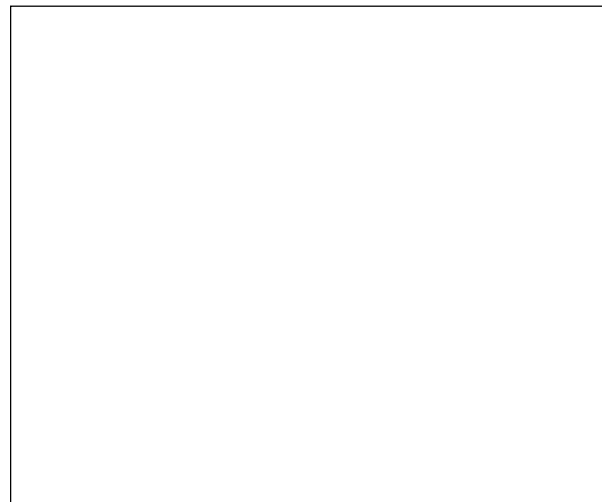
Only about 13 percent of those polled in the Captivate study said they might have done something they regretted with a work spouse, but many of them were senior executives, said Marden.

“It’s not unusual for senior executives in investment banks and at hedge funds to rely heavily on their administrative assistants,” said Roy Cohen, a career counselor and author of “The Wall Street Professional’s Survival Guide.”

Sometimes, he added, the assistant is referred to as Mrs. “Whatever the last name of her boss is.”

Unlike casual friendships at work this type of bond “requires unconditional loyalty and discretion. And these folks are compensated generously and often treated with deference

advertisement



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™



by their colleagues in the organization,” Cohen said.

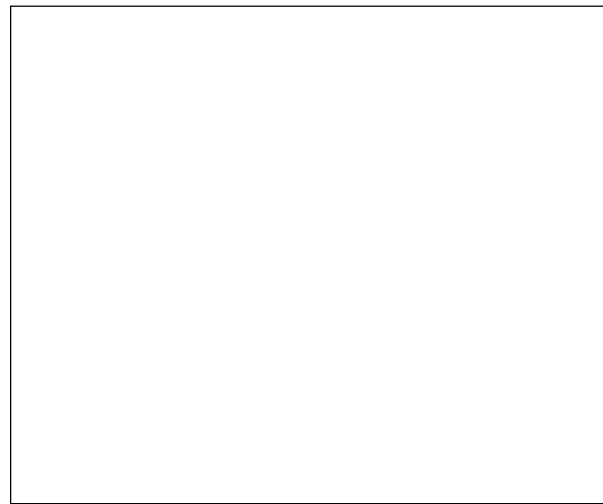
For Sokolowski and Peterson, their bond is about nothing more than a work friendship.

“We don’t finish each other sentences, or go for walks or any of those things that you do with your own spouse,” Peterson said.

And, Sokolowski added, “there’s no flirting, and we’re not joined at the hip. If I need some advice, or change for the pop machine, she’s my go-to colleague.”

*Eve Tahmincioglu writes the weekly "Your Career" column for msnbc.com and chronicles workplace issues in her blog, [CareerDiva.net](#).*

advertisement



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™