

GETTING IN

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Sex at Work: An MBA Guide

By FRANCESCA Di MEGLIO



As first-year MBA students start their summer internships and graduates begin their post-MBA careers, a lot of things can go wrong—from using the wrong fork at a business lunch to a career-ending mistake. But one thing that gets relatively little attention is something that arguably should get more than it does: sex in the workplace.

About a third of all MBA students are smart, ambitious women in their late 20s; the vast majority will work for men in their 50s. Sex in the workplace isn't a stretch. Just this weekend, *The New York Times* published a [story](#) about a partner at the venture capital firm Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers who is suing the firm, alleging five years of retaliation following her decision to end a sexual relationship with a junior partner. The events Ellen Pao describes in her lawsuit began shortly after she joined the firm in 2005, seven years after receiving her MBA at [Harvard Business School](#).

“Sex is a touchy subject and it’s awkward to talk about,” says Jennifer Crittenden, an alumna of Indiana University’s [Kelley School of Business](#) and author of *The Discreet Guide for Executive Women: How to Work Well with Men (and Other Difficulties)* (Whistling Rabbit Press, February 2012). “Women are entering the workforce unprepared and when they arrive they make career-ruining decisions.”

Sexual relationships in the workplace, and sexual harassment, are not always clear-cut cases of right and wrong. Inappropriate relationships between a boss and subordinate, such as the one that reportedly led to former CEO Brian Dunn’s resignation at Best Buy in April, are almost always off-limits, says Crittenden.

But grey areas abound. Senior Lecturer Leigh Hafrey at MIT [Sloan School of Management](#), recalled an incident involving a female student who was part of a team taking a client to a strip club. The boss had the driver pull over and made the female student get out, so she could not attend. The student felt she had been discriminated against. “These things happen all the time,” says Hafrey.

Today, Sloan students sometimes discuss incidents like this in class. In a four-session ethics module called “Ethics, Values, and Voice” students break up into groups to discuss events at work that challenged their values, what made it possible to speak up, what made it difficult, and how the company’s values come into play in these situations.

Hafrey says business schools have a responsibility to teach students how to deal with ethical issues, including sex in the workplace. Here are some tips:

Be Professional: Never date or sleep with co-workers, says Crittenden. “In a perfect world, don’t date fellow MBA students [while at school] either,” she adds. “It’s worth it to practice developing a professional relationship with members of the opposite sex.”

Just Say No: If someone makes advances toward you, just say no. Refrain from sending mixed messages with body language or dress, says Crittenden.

Watch the Booze: Never get drunk at after-hour events and keep things professional over dinner and when traveling with co-workers, she adds. People need to be clear-headed to prevent mistakes with their relationships.

Keep Your Cool: One’s goal should always be to maintain a good working relationship with anyone who is making advances, says Hafrey. Communicate this desire with the boss who is flirting or attempting to step over the line and explain that a sexual relationship would only get in the way of work. If that does not work, says Hafrey, be prepared to take action by doing something like talking to HR or the boss’ superior.

Speak Up: Taking action need not necessarily mean confronting the person or having a big showdown with HR. At a nonprofit where she once worked, Jo-Ellen Pozner, an assistant professor at the UC Berkeley [Haas School of Business](#) recalls a superior who spent most of the day watching porn in the presence of co-workers who were women. Pozner called someone she trusted in the organization and framed her complaint as a request for advice. That was enough for the porn-watcher to be let go. She would advise students to do the same if they find themselves in a similar situation.

“The primary message is that inappropriate behavior is seldom directed toward just one person,” says Pozner. “If you feel someone has crossed the line, it probably has happened to someone else in the past, and it will probably happen to someone else in the future, so it’s important to stop it now.”