

“that’s what she said”

a ford & harrison blog about the popular television series “the office”

Not the Godfather

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When the show started, I thought it was going to be a doozy, with Pam conducting Sabre’s Hygiene Day, but it quickly shifted to something far more, well, mundane — and far more complicated — personal relationships at work.

No, not the intimate kind — rather, the kind where workers become friends, in some cases close friends, and in the case of Michael Scott, closer than they think they are friends. For the christening of Jim and Pam’s daughter, Cece, Michael (not Jim and Pam) invited the entire office to attend. Then, Pam had to not-so-gently tell Michael he was NOT their daughter’s godfather. Why is this complicated?

Employers expect, and encourage, employees to socialize at work, to become friends and comrades. Office morale is critically important for the business world — people who get along and even enjoy working together are happier and more productive and have fewer absences from work. The problem is, the only thing worse than no camaraderie between coworkers is a camaraderie gone south.

So what’s the answer? Do you forbid coworkers from having lunch together, ban them from socializing before, during, and after work? No, obviously not. But it is important to remember that friendships, like dating relationships, can go bad.

And when it happens among coworkers, frequently it spills over into the workplace. Again, no employment case arises in a vacuum — in fact, in my experience, few [employment discrimination](#) cases are truly about discrimination. Rather, it’s the perception of discrimination, usually borne out of workplace conflict, that fuels employment litigation. And while that’s not something any employer can definitively prevent, it’s important enough to keep an eye on.

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