



## Is Your Office Like "The Office"?

**The answer is probably yes, but that's not all bad--you may actually be doing something right.**

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### Is Your Office Like "The Office"?

Thousands of years from now, when archaeologists troll through the internet or visit Earth to excavate artifacts, if they discover film from NBC's hit sitcom *The Office*, they'll likely conclude it's a documentary, given that the show pretends to be a reality series following the ups and downs of a staff in an office. Don't laugh! When you come right down to it, *The Office* and *your* office are probably a lot more similar than you realize. Let us count the ways.

#### Office Romance in *The Office*

Although there's probably someone at *The Office* that everyone can relate to, the heroes of this mockumentary sitcom are really Jim Halpert and Pam Beesly, who've had something of an unrequited, ill-defined romance-friendship thing going on for the past three seasons. Their relationship was complicated first by Pam's doomed engagement to Roy Anderson, who works in the warehouse, and now by Jim's budding romance with another co-worker. Jim and Pam are also arguably the sanest co-workers at the Scranton, Pennsylvania, branch of the Dunder-Mifflin Paper Co.

But they're not the only ones flirting around the water cooler. Assistant ("to the") regional manager Dwight Schrute has a very low-key thing going on with Angela in accounting. And Ryan Howard, the temp-turned-salesperson, is openly involved with bubbly Kelly Kapoor, though it's painfully obvious that he wants out of the relationship. Kelly, on the other hand, seems to be hoping they'll settle down and have kids soon. Even Michael Scott, probably the most inept office manager on earth, has had a dalliance or two, most notably a brief but ill-advised fling with his boss, Jan Levinson.

#### Office Romance in *Your Office*

When all is said and done, it's probably not as entertaining as on TV. And there are plenty of reasons not to want couplings throughout the cubicles. For instance, if you're the odd man out having a discussion with two co-workers who are sharing the copier in the office and the toothpaste at home, you may feel like there's been a power shift--and not in your direction.

Then there's always the question of whether the couple whispering in the office next to yours are actually working--or planning their next weekend getaway. And what if the romance blows up? Do you really want to deal with the almost palpable tension that's sure to exist whenever the ex-lovers run into each other?

Despite all the reasons people shouldn't get involved in an office romance, the fact is, it goes on all the time. Four out of 10 people

recently surveyed by the Society of Human Resource Managers and CareerJournal.com reported they'd dated someone from work. And Vault.com, a job search site, recently did a survey and concluded that 58 percent of us have had an office romance at some point in our careers, and 43 percent of those people are involved in an office romance right now.

Whether you're rooting for that couple in corporate to tie the knot or nauseous every time you imagine your top salesperson breaking up with your HR director, suck it up and try not to break it up. Office romances are inevitable, and it's probably better that you know about them than force people to sneak around behind your back.

### **Ineffective Managers**

Michael Scott personifies ineffective. He's at once a micromanager and clueless about the goings-on at work. If anything, he's mostly concerned with being liked, creating a fun workplace and trying to influence how people feel and react to him. It's all about him--not his team. And even when he *is* thinking about others, he too often looks at his employees through his own world view, instead of trying to see the situation through his staff's eyes.

For instance, after his mentor, a former branch manager, dies--a situation he's pretty upset about--he tells his mostly uninterested staff that he'll be available in his office if anyone needs consoling. When no one drops by, he tries to comfort Pam, who's coping just fine, thanks, and gives her an unnecessarily long hug.

Ironically, of all the people in *The Office* who need to be managed, it's Michael. Pam, for instance, frequently watches his back. As the receptionist, she covers for him with corporate bigwigs--including his boss, Jan, who is frequently forced to deal with the aftermath of his inefficient and often un-PC behavior--and often delays connecting Michael's calls in order to prevent him making an ass out of himself. (Instead, she pretends to connect Michael to the call, gives him a chance to get a joke out of his system, and then brings in the caller right after the punch line.)

### **Ineffective Managers in *Your Office***

If you have an ineffective manager working for you (or you're working for one) but you don't want to fire the clod (or quit), you either need to go with the status quo or try to fix things, which is a plausible plan only if you're the one signing the paychecks.

Terry Bacon, author of the new book, *What People Want: A Manager's Guide to Building Relationships That Work*, suggests that the owner of a company have a heart-to-heart talk with their manager, away from the office, "and ask, 'If you were hit by a bus tomorrow, who would take over?'" Often that brings them up short because they can't think of anyone."

According to Bacon, an effective manager should be growing their team and grooming future leaders because without them, the company can't grow. The worst managers limit people. "It's a syndrome--the 'nobody-can-be-as-good-as-me' syndrome." Bacon says Michael has that syndrome to the point where he's "pathological."

But Michael isn't beyond redemption. In 2005, *Harvard Business Review* came out with a study that found employees preferred to work with a "loveable fool" over a "competent jerk." Michael's a combination of the two--a loveable jerk. His co-workers may do a lot of eye-rolling, but they don't really hate Michael. Those who've worked for him for any length of time recognize that he really cares about his employees, and in an age where you can get fired via e-mail, that's saying something.

### **Political Correctness in *The Office***

Some fans have observed that, in a way, the entire series is all about political correctness in the office. Certainly the show is a comedy of bad manners in the workplace.

As early as the second episode, Michael was in hot water for doing a bad imitation of a Chris Rock comedy routine, inspiring corporate to send a sensitivity trainer into the office; in the second season, when Dunder-Mifflin organized a "Women in the Workplace" seminar, Michael, who felt left out, gathered all the men into the warehouse for a "Men in the Workplace" seminar.

And, of course, there was the time Michael ended up "outing" Oscar as being gay. Jan from corporate made it clear she wasn't pleased, and Michael, later hoping to make amends, tried to make Oscar feel more welcome by encouraging employees to gather around Dwight's desk so they could collectively look at gay pornography.

### **Political Correctness in *Your Office***

You know, maybe the less said here, the better. And that, in the end, is Michael's problem. He says too much--everything except the words "I'm sorry" and "Tell me how I can make things right." He inevitably and frequently stumbles over politically incorrect trip wires and tries too hard and fast to fix things, which usually sets off another explosion of humiliation for everyone within earshot. In one episode, Kelly Kapoor, who is Indian, invited everyone to a Hindu holiday celebration. To "help" out, Michael took it upon himself to educate the office on Indian culture, showing a slideshow of famous Indians--including Apu from *The Simpsons*.

If you're very afraid of making a Michael Scott-sized gaffe with a co-worker who's very different from you when it comes to religion or ethnicity or sexual preference, stick to noncontroversial topics, says [business consultant Kathleen Pagana](#). Pagana, who's currently writing a book on business etiquette, says, "Try to find some commonalities to discuss related to the work setting. Feel free to discuss such 'safe' topics as the weather or traffic or sports." That may mean you'll forever have a superficial relationship with your co-worker, but that's certainly better than having a relationship that's hostile.

### **Office Culture in *The Office***

Dunder-Mifflin Paper Co.'s office culture, at least from the corporate perspective, is professional, kind of stodgy and, when it comes to fostering traditions in the workplace, pretty much nonexistent. Michael, though, continually tries to bring some real pizzazz to the idea of office culture. He may be an idiot, and he may simply like having fun in the office more than actually working, but you gotta give him credit for trying to make the Scranton branch a fun place to work.

There was the time, for instance, he held a "Movie Monday" and showed feature films--in thirty minute increments--to get rid of the Monday blues. He also instituted the annual staff "Dundies" awards, which are generally loathed by most of the employees, probably because they're nothing one would ever dare put on their resume: For years, Pam cringed when award time came around, knowing she'd receive the "World's Longest Engagement" award.

Still, whether it's the annual Christmas party or the motivational trip on a yacht forever remembered as the Booze Cruise, there *is* a strong office culture present in *The Office*, although it's not quite what Michael had intended. At the Scranton office, the employees have all banded together and feel very much united--in their quest to survive Michael's eccentricities.

But when the employees are banded together--like the time Jim threw a party at his home for the staff without inviting Michael--it's really about the only time there is unity. For the most part, much of the office culture centers around everyone either trying to get power, display their power or demonstrate to another employee how little power that person has. For instance, during the time Ryan worked at Dunder-Mifflin as a temp, he was often reminded how lowly his status at the company was. In one episode, Michael asked him to come in early one morning and, when he did, to bring in some breakfast for him.

"I got you a sausage, egg and cheese biscuit," reported Ryan, when he showed up hours before the office was going to open.

"Oh, yummy, yummy. Thank you, Ryan," said Michael.

And then Ryan naturally asked, "What was the thing you needed me to come in early for?"

Michael: "Uh... the sausage, egg and cheese biscuit."

### **Office Culture in *Your* Office**

From power plays to playing around, every office has some sort of culture, according to Paul Endress, CEO of [Maximum Advantage](#), an HR consulting firm in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. But if you're trying to instigate a specific office culture, don't--because you can't really force it, says Endress. Office culture, according to Endress, is "almost never built at a conscious level--it just sort of accumulates during our lives. Pieces can be changed, but it's a slow process."

But it's an important process. Arguably, the quality of our office culture is a big part of the reason we love or loathe our jobs. "We can all relate to the absolute absurdity often experienced in the workplace, and that's why *The Office* is so funny," says Vince Thompson, author of *Ignited: Managers Lighting Up Their Companies and Careers*. "Instead of going from good to great, we're often heading from mediocre to crappy, as the fear of litigation forces managers to talk like robots, the pursuit of quarterly numbers forces people to ration Styrofoam cups, and the unempowered try to act empowered in a last-ditch effort to salvage a ray of sanity."

On the other hand, just like in the real world, even *The Office* rewards the best employees. A recent episode showed several Stamford employees transferring to the Scranton branch. One of those employees was Andy, who began an immediate rivalry with Dwight, doing everything he could to kiss up to Michael and take Dwight's place as Michael's right-hand man. And while that worked to some extent--because Michael is such an attention hog--in the end, it didn't matter. Ironically, it was Jim who'd been promoted, unbeknownst to them all--and on the merits of his work.

So, yeah, maybe your office is like *The Office*, but as long as you can still laugh at your surroundings--and try to improve them--maybe you shouldn't worry.

### **Online Exclusive**

Find out if you're a Michael, a Dwight or a Jim in our quiz, [Which Office Character Are You?](#)

*Geoff Williams is a journalist who currently works out of his home office in Loveland, Ohio. Before that, he worked in several offices, ranging from the slightly dysfunctional to no different from a nuthouse.*

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