

Help! Save My Career!

by Donald Asher, America's Job Search Guru

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Dear Guru Don:

My coworker is getting married, and she's a full grown Bridezilla. I could write a movie about the living hell she has put all of us through. In spite of my total lack of interest in such things, I have learned about "hot colors" and theme consultants and catering contracts and hand-made stationery and persnickety musicians who break their contracts in favor of better-paying gigs. I never even knew there were theme consultants. It's enough to make me push pins into voodoo dolls at night. The only part of this wedding I'm looking forward to is the part where they leave on the honeymoon.

She hasn't done half her job in the last month. She has a special "wedding" cell phone, and although I might wait for days for a response to a simple email query, that wedding phone is answered in a nanosecond, even if we are all in a meeting, and even if the boss is visiting from upstairs. That makes a total of *three* cell phones she has, and she never turns any of them off, even though the only one she always answers is the wedding one.

I am a single guy. I don't have kids. I don't date anyone from work. I just do my job and don't complain. I don't understand why certain people have these insane privileges just because they have sick kids, get engaged, have an attack of melodrama, or whatever.

Should I start a movement for non-prima donna rights? Should I just call in sick like some of the other slackers on this floor, to even things out a little? What should I do about this Queen of Distractions?

Sign me,

Down with Love in New Jersey

Dear Down with Love:

I feel your pain. Humans going through life changes can be a pain in the head. Let me help you see this problem in a bigger perspective, however.

Back when the domestic economy was driven by factory production, the employer had every right to demand an accounting for every minute a worker was 'at work.' If you weren't at your station to screw bolts into widgets, the whole line didn't move. So the boss had the authority to say what you could and couldn't do, minute by minute. However, that's not the case with the knowledge economy.

In the knowledge economy, employees can work if they're awake. We all check our emails at 10 p.m.; we get on planes on Sunday afternoon to travel to Monday morning meetings. We go to dinner with colleagues and discuss our business problems for hours

and hours. And we even date and fall in love with people we meet at work, in part so we can spend even more time on work issues with someone who understands every nuance. So the division between work and personal life is blurred.

The employer is in fact the primary beneficiary of this breakdown between work and not-work. Part of the tradeoff is that a little online shopping and a little off-task socializing must be tolerated at the office! If knowledge workers were to start working 9 to 5 for real, almost any organization's competitiveness would evaporate in a couple of weeks. So can't we all just get along?

Here's the real complaint in your letter: She hasn't been doing half her job for a month. It sounds like (a) the wedding is eminent, and this too shall pass, (b) you liked her well enough before she became a Bridezilla, and so there's hope you'll like her again when this is all over, and (c) you like your job overall, except for the people who abuse sick leave. So, my advice is to cut her some slack about the wedding, and try to let her know what critical work she needs to get done in spite of this very exciting thing she is obsessing over for now.

There are many life changes through which an employer should expect to have a *temporary* problem with an employee. If the problem becomes chronic, then of course discipline may be in order. But for most of these situations, a little patience is probably better than any kind of intervention. Let's talk about this from the HR perspective.

It is good HR practice to cut people a little slack when they are getting married or divorced. These are incredible distractions, but good people before the event will become good people again after the event. So before you fire someone good, and hire someone who may not work out, my advice is to lower your expectations for awhile.

The same approach goes for a birth of a child, a death in the family, an acute illness, rehab from drug or alcohol addiction, or for some women a rough onset of menopause. They'll be back on track and better than ever if the company has the wisdom to give them some flexibility during a trying time.

Sick kids are a little bit different issue. If someone has an occasional problem with sick kids, then that's just life, but if he or she appears to have chronic problems with sick kids, it may be time to step in not with warnings and threats, but with some assistance on developing a safety net that suits the employee's unique situation. The more valuable and irreplaceable the employee, the more assistance should be offered.

A similar approach should be used with employees facing problems with their elderly parents. If they're having repeated crises, then HR should offer assistance of some kind, be it planning services or Employee Assistance Program (EAP) counseling, or emergency leave.

Of course, there are some areas where an employer is legally required to be flexible, such as with military obligations and the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). In these

cases, good HR practice is tied to legal compliance. But as I have tried to establish here, it is good HR practice to be patient with employees through any *temporary* problem if they are otherwise good employees. Smart HR managers know that hiring new duds is always possible, and replacing good employees is always fraught with risk. And as coworkers and bosses, we should be aware of this, too. Let Bridezilla get married, my friend. And let us hope that she will be there for you, should you need it in the future.

My best wishes for your continued success,

Donald Asher

Send your career emergency to don@donaldasher.com, and watch this space for Asher's response.

BIO: Donald Asher is a nationally known writer and speaker on careers and higher education. He is the author of eleven books, including *Cracking the Hidden Job Market*; *How to Get Any Job: Life Launch and Re-Launch for Everyone Under 30*; *Graduate Admissions Essays*, the best-selling guide to the graduate admissions process; *Asher's Bible of Executive Resumes*; *Cool Colleges for the Hyper-Intelligent, Self-Directed, Late Blooming, and Just Plain Different*; and *Who Gets Promoted, Who Doesn't, and Why* (named Business Book of the Year 2008 by national career columnist Joyce Lain Kennedy). Asher speaks over 100 days a year from coast to coast, to college and corporate audiences. He is eager to hear your career emergency.