
Job sharing at a senior level – a personal perspective



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This article is based on a presentation given at the SCONUL 'Deputies' Gathering in Dublin in September 2003. Judith and Julie job shared three different posts for a total of 13 years, being promoted as job sharers in the process.

We were pioneers in that ours was the first job share in the university which now has a fully developed job share policy. Our history of job sharing has a number of interesting, probably unique features, which we feel raises some important issues when considering job sharing at a senior management level. This paper describes that history, what made it work for us, outlines some advantages to employers – with a few pitfalls – and ends with some personal thoughts on the topic.

Way back in 1982 Julie was working as a full time subject librarian with her colleague and friend Judith who had a part time subject librarian post. After the birth of Julie's first child in February 1983, she decided that she wanted to spend time with her new son while continuing her career development in a profession she enjoyed and felt she had much to contribute to. Both of us had read a little about job sharing arrangements in other organisations and decided to do some further research on the topic, to ascertain whether or not this would work for us.

It is important at this point to note that there is a clear distinction between the concepts of job sharing and job splitting, though job sharing is often used to cover both. To offer a personal definition, job sharing is a flexible work arrangement where the responsibilities of a single post are shared between two people, that is each partner covers every aspect of the job. A job split is where each partner has a unique set of responsibilities which the other never touches. There need never be any contact between the partners in the latter arrangement, whereas in the former, communication is vital. It became very clear to us that a true job share was what was required and wanted in our case. We would contend that in the information profession, and probably in many others, job splitting only works at relatively junior levels. More senior posts have to be shared.

Having done our research and decided that a job share arrangement of Julie's current post was what we wanted, we had to plan our approach to the library management. At the time, the then Polytechnic of North London did not have a formal job sharing policy, so we had to sell the idea to our line manager and head of service as an innovation that would be of benefit to all parties. There are some real advantages to employers of this arrangement which are described later and our head of service, though a little apprehensive, was willing to allow us to demonstrate them.

Our job share of the subject librarian post proved to be such a success that our then new head of service took a great leap of faith and promoted us as a job share to the site library management post, the first management job share in the university. When the new learning centre opened in 1994 he was sufficiently impressed with us as job sharers in a management post to offer us a sideways move into one of the new team manager posts.

WHAT MADE IT WORK FOR US?

There is no doubt that without our previous history of operating a successful job share as subject librarians we would have found it more difficult to make a success of our more senior management job share post. During the time we had spent job sharing a subject librarian post we had plenty of opportunity to work out the practicalities of job sharing for us and for our colleagues and managers. Although we realised that we would have to make some adjustments in our new post we felt that we would be able to continue with some of our tried and tested methods of organising our work arrangements and ourselves.

A significant aspect of our job share was the way we organised our working pattern. We had always worked two and a half days a week each and had one hour of overlap on one day. We felt there was no need to change this pattern but we were prepared to review this and make changes if necessary. In fact this arrangement continued to work well for us and the rest of the staff. However if we had not had previous experience of working together we would probably have needed to have arranged more overlap time, at least for an initial settling in period. We attended any meetings that occurred on our respective days at work and made sure we briefed each other before and after such meetings. Because of our past experience we had developed a relationship of trust and did not feel that we both had to attend all meetings. Occasionally if there was a significant or important meeting that we felt we should both attend we were usually able to arrange this. At first this caused some consternation with our colleagues who thought that two bodies meant two 'voting rights' on important issues. We were able to satisfy everyone that this was not the case.

Our attitude to our working pattern was flexible and we agreed from the start that, if necessary, we would be prepared to cover for the absences of our partner if this was necessary. For example if an important meeting fell on a day one of us was not normally in work but our partner was on holiday we would try to attend in their place. We also tried, whenever possible, not to take annual leave at the same time so there was usually, although not invariably, at least one of us at work for at least part of the working week.

Our use of physical space was to a certain extent decreed by the amount of space that the university allowed us to have. Because we were a job share we were expected to share a desk, phone, chair, filing cabinets and later a PC although we did each have our own e-mail accounts and never felt the necessity for having a shared one. We had a common in-tray and work in progress file. Staff soon became used to copying us both in on relevant emails and knew that we would share the contents of emails with each other on the few occasions when only one of us was the recipient.

Without good communication between partners, job sharing at senior level could not work and any failure in communication would be catastrophic. We had already worked out that for us this was the most significant aspect of our successful job sharing arrangement. It started from the point

when we first applied for our first post as a job share, through to contributing to the planning of a new staffing structure, applying for a getting a senior management post right to the point when we both moved on to full time work. Good communication is essential at all times to ensure that any problems or potential problems are dealt with promptly, and if possible, before they arise or become public. We had to be prepared to be honest with each other and admit to any weaknesses or concerns as well as acknowledging the strengths of our partner. We had to find practical solutions to our generally open and honest approach to communication, remembering that we started to job share before e-mail was a generally accepted method of communication. From the start, as well as keeping our own diaries, we had a shared diary where we kept each other informed of our activities and appointments. In addition we had a notebook in which we noted significant activities, progress with current work and planning for the future. This may seem an additional burden but we both found it a useful aspect of our work in that at the end of our working week we had to take some time out to reflect on our activities, consolidate our thoughts and put down onto paper the significant actions for the next few days. It was also a useful reference tool if we needed to review progress and developments on projects and other aspects of our work. We never kept confidential information in this book but included references to where such information could be found. This method of communicating seems to be the preferred method for other senior management job sharers.¹

It was important for us that we were treated as interchangeable and that we were able to present a united management approach to the staff we managed and to our colleagues. We were fortunate that we had a common management style and rarely had any differences of opinion about how any staffing problems or issues should be dealt with. When these did occur, which was rarely, we made sure that we sorted out any conflicts in private before we had any sort of interface with staff. Of course there were occasions when staff did try to play us off against each other and we felt this was inevitable. However these incidents became less and less frequent as staff realised that we did present united interface with them and we would never countermand the instructions or decisions of the other.

Finally, without sympathetic managers our job share would never have been successful for us either on a professional or personal level. We

found that once we had overcome the hurdle of convincing our head of service that we could make a professional job share work at subject librarian level we had few problems and an enormous amount of support came from our immediate and more senior managers throughout the time we spent as a job share. On the whole we felt they were as committed to making the job share work as we were.

ADVANTAGES TO EMPLOYERS

Many documented advantages for institutions support job sharing at more junior staffing levels but more recently publications have presented a case for the advantages of job sharing at more senior levels.^{2,3} Some of these we feel were significant for us at the time we were job sharing.

True, allowing and even encouraging job sharing can act as a recruitment and retention mechanism. Certainly we do not think either of us would have stayed so long at the University of North London if we had not had the opportunity to job share. This meant that we could maintain our professional jobs and bring up young families at the same time. Job sharing gives an opportunity for staff who have a whole variety of domestic or personal reasons to work part time in posts that do not easily lend themselves to reduced working hours. The opportunity to job share is certainly an incentive for any staff, as it was for us, for whom some time away from work is more important than money.

The university was able to recoup any investment it had made in either of us. Resources invested in our training were not lost and we feel were well and truly repaid. We felt we were making a worthwhile contribution to the organisation in which we worked and we were able to maintain and indeed develop our professional expertise. Our job satisfaction and hence our morale was high, enhanced by the fact that we were able to progress up the management ladder and so did not lose out on any promotion opportunities, along with our full time colleagues. We cannot be certain but we feel that promotion may have been more difficult if we had each been working in part time jobs and applied for more senior posts on this basis.

Finally we do feel that the university got 'two heads for the price of one'. As we have already said we wanted to be seen as interchangeable and always tried to present as a united interface but this did not mean that we did not function as individuals and we did have our differences

of opinion. We each brought something different to the job, although we both operated in the same managerial style, i.e. open, consultative, approachable. However we did have our own strengths and weaknesses, for example one of us was generally perceived as the better communicator and the other as the better planner. This meant that because we had an open approach to each other we were able to use these differences to our advantage by having critical discussions that often resulted in us being able to offer creative solutions to problems. There was a definite synergy to our relationship that allowed us to bounce ideas off each other and solve problems. We also felt that because we spent a significant amount of time each week on other aspects of our lives we were able to bring a fresh perspective and energy to work issues. However this did not mean we were not committed to our work and the fact that we felt committed to each other and to making the job share work meant we often worked more than our allocated hours and often communicated with each other outside work, usually by phone but also occasionally over a drink in the pub!

PITFALLS

We did find that it was not always easy to operate as a job share at a senior management level. Disadvantages and pitfalls have been documented in the literature about job sharing. Although the problems we encountered were fairly restricted and once staff and managers became used to us operating as a job share and could see we were committed to making it work we (and they) were able to deal with most problems. As we have already said there were some problems at the beginning with staff trying to play us off one against the other but this period did not last long. We had anticipated that this could be a problem area and had discussed possible solutions that included open and continual communication and absolute honesty with each other when these issues arose. If either of the job share partners is inflexible in their attitude to work or management then this could be a problem, fortunately for us we never encountered this and if we had then we doubt that our job share would have been so successful. We were also fortunate in having the support of our managers and the university personnel department who were able to cope with the additional small but not insignificant amount of administration and paperwork.

IN CONCLUSION

We have sometimes been asked if we would employ a management job share ourselves. The answer is a qualified 'yes'. The success of a job

share at this level depends very much on the attitude and to some extent the personalities of the partners. It also depends on the support and management given to the job sharers. Our own experience of job sharing was wholly positive and we hope demonstrates that job sharing at a senior management level can work very well.

REFERENCES

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