



FlexBulletin #47: Job Sharing – Productive or Prohibitive?

April 19, 2011

*[In the last several **Bulletins** we've focused on systemic changes in guidelines, success stories and leadership messages that would help strengthen the productivity of workplace flexibility. This issue we shift from macro to micro – in fact to the least utilized, yet one of the most productive, flexible work arrangements. With very rare exceptions, you can inquire in almost any organization these days about their flexibility practices and they will list usage ranging in order from flextime to telecommuting to remote work to part-time – and, as an afterthought, “Oh, yes...and I think we have job sharing.*

An irony will occasionally follow. A story of a well-known, even legendary job share pair will come up. They do the work of a person-and-a-half, customers love them and they've been promoted twice as a pair. It's as if their slogan were “The few, the proud, the job sharers.” But in an organization of fifty or a hundred thousand employees, hundred or thousands of telecommuters, not two job sharers, will be the face of flexibility. We will suggest that it is job sharing's true flexibility in design and demands that makes it intriguing to marvel at but uncomfortable to promote. Among the challenges:

- *In settings where ‘cooperation’ is extolled, job sharers must truly **collaborate***
 - *While all flex needs flexible management, job sharers require **flexible managers***
 - *Where change is touted, job sharing demands **real change**: in structure and behavior*
- We will address below how the many gains are offset by a myriad of perceived challenges, and how the long march to the flexible workplace is marked by many neo-rigid detours.]*

JOB SHARING arose as a problem-solver for the perils of part-time

I was reminded a few months back of the great work of Barney Olmsted, Suzanne Smith and the staff of New Ways to Work in San Francisco in putting Job Sharing on the flexibility map in the early 1980s. They promoted job sharing as a tool to help overcome some of the constraints facing part-time workers:

- Two people could share many jobs that otherwise required a full-time commitment
- Proving themselves in those positions could lead to promotions as a pair
- Each partner could express more of their distinct strengths in a role
- Companies could benefit from skill blends they might not find in a single person
- The productivity of two focused, highly organized partners could add rare value
- Coverage during PTO was superior to that with part-timers

A CLIENT'S JOB SHARING (modified) success story helps flesh out these values:

The manager of a skilled nursing facility is enthusiastic about his job sharing pair, Lorraine and Tara. He says simply “I wouldn't take a full-time (40-hour) position over this job share.” Lorraine had been working part-time and teaching Clinical Dietetics at the University of Connecticut part-time and did not want to give that up when her position went full-time. Her now colleague Tara wanted to stop working full-time and cut back to a part-time schedule. With their manager's approval, Lorraine and Tara began a job share that has lasted 5 years..

The developed together the essentials of the arrangement. They worked out a schedule of a two-day/three-day split. They agreed to provide vacation coverage for each other. They worked out a communication style that built on their long relationship and their comfort with catching up verbally – face-to-face, on the phone or in meetings.

What has not changed over the years is their seamless, high quality service to the nursing facility's residents. Among the many benefits of this job share are:

- ✓ *The retention of highly talented staff who might otherwise have left*
- ✓ *The integration of outside nursing and teaching innovations into their daily work*
- ✓ *The ability to plan and cover for each other's time off*
- ✓ *The application of two unique and fresh perspectives to procedures and problems*
- ✓ *The division of labor and an effective communication system which eliminate the need for any extra hours that might be required in an "overlap day"*

Their manager has been impressed by the way different skills and knowledge have been blended in the pair and improved their productivity noticeably. He has also benefited from their very strong communication skills. Both sharers are delighted with the arrangement. Tara, who has two children and a husband who travels, says "I can envision doing this for a number of years." And Lorraine comments "I get to continue teaching and I love it! I also love the work I do here. And one really feeds the other." And she adds "My 14 year-old daughter needs special attention, so I need a flexible job. This arrangement alleviates many of the job stresses that others may experience."

IF JOB SHARING'S SO GREAT, why aren't people lining up for it?

Clearly job sharing stories like this are impressive examples of retention, engagement, productivity and other desirable outcomes. And employee satisfaction with these arrangements is often off the charts. So what might stand in the way of greater – or even far greater – usage?

Here are a few observations from a wide range of settings:

- **Part-time is seen as hard to manage – job sharing is seen as worse** – instead of the glass-half-full view that this is a different form of full-time, it's **seen** as two part-timers with the fear that it will be hard to manage.
- **Managers are left to fend for themselves** – flexibility training for managers is sparse; customized job sharing training is almost nonexistent (*full disclosure*: we offer online job sharing for pairs and managers – see FlexWise URL below.) Without support, managers will refrain.
- **A review of most guidelines will show a preponderance of "problems"** – sections on how to fill open sharer positions, dealing with "overlap hours", benefits challenges, etc. are necessary. But there is rarely a balance of success factors and stories with challenges.
- **Job sharing could flourish in a changed culture** – but lip service aside, the elements of a truly changed culture – the suspension of old assumptions, the deep focus on results, effective manager training and proficiency in communication in the event of conflict – rarely exist in abundance in most firms.
- **Unlike telecommuting/remote work, job sharing is seldom in a campaign** – one could argue that offsite work is an easier sell, being "working at a different desk" rather than challenging the way we structure work.

There may be many more factors at work. One thing is clear: it takes a more focused effort than simply rolling out this option on a menu to achieve its potential in your flexible workplace.

[DIALING FOR DATA] *Stacey Gibson and I will be calling many of you over the next few weeks for brief calls to understand if and where you are in the remodeling adventure. We can discretely share the results with all of you in a future issue. (And on the same call we will seek, and happily accept, your suggestions for other issues that the **Bulletin** might take up.)* The calls have been quite productive so far, and we look forward to your continued cooperation.

*Rupert & Company, publisher of the **Bulletin**, is the global leader in creating business-beneficial Flexible Work Arrangements. To see our Bulletin Archive, approach, services and client stories go to:*

www.rupertandcompany.com

To see our online toolkit and job sharing training, go to:

www.flexwise.com

© 2011 Rupert & Company. All Rights Reserved