
Time Out with Half-Time: Job Sharing in the Nineties

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Abstract

Job sharing is an alternative form of employment which may often be overlooked by the average worker. Apart from the negative consequences of receiving half the salary of a full-time position, what are some of the benefits enjoyed by people who job share? Eight women were interviewed for this qualitative research study. Rather than simply allowing more time for them to spend with their children or on domestic chores, job sharing provided them with some unanticipated opportunities to enjoy a richer quality of life.

Résumé

Un travail à temps partagé est une alternative d'emploi qui est souvent oubliée par le travailleur. Autre que les conséquences négatives de ne recevoir que la moitié d'un salaire d'un travail à temps plein, quels sont les bénéfices dont profitent les gens à temps partagé? Huit femmes ont été interviewées pour cette étude qualitative. Plutôt que de leur permettre de passer plus de temps avec leurs enfants ou à des tâches domestiques, les employées à temps partagé ont découverts des opportunités inattendues leur permettant ainsi de jouir d'une qualité de vie plus riche.

In her book *Counselling Adults in Transition*, Schlossberg (1984) defines the key role of counsellors as being “. . . to help adults achieve, increase, or maintain their capacity to love, work, and play” (Schlossberg, p. 2). Other authors (Hansen, 1993; Kahnweiler & Kahnweiler, 1992; Kinnier, Katz & Berry, 1991; McAuliffe, 1993; Wilcox-Matthew & Minor, 1989) have proposed that when career counsellors assist clients in reshaping their work situations, the domains of love and play are also enhanced.

Career development professionals, in response to current trends and issues in the field, need to be aware of the options around when and how work can be done. As Hansen (1993) points out, “while trait and factor approaches to vocational choice are still valid, more developmental-contextual and integrative approaches will be called for, as work patterns and workplaces change, and individuals seek more balance in their lives” (p. 21).

Kahnweiler and Kahnweiler (1992) also acknowledge that the traditional approach to career planning, trying to match an individual's skills, interests, and personality with a job, does not go far enough. They would encourage their clients to

also assess how a job and/or employer fits in with one's personal aspirations. Can the position accommodate one's preferred lifestyle after working hours? Are there enough hours in the day to spend quality time with spouse, children, and friends? Is the potential employer attuned to work/family balance issues, and how is that demonstrated? (p. 255)

The existence of several forms of alternative work arrangements can be found in a review of the literature (Blyton, 1985; Harriman, 1982; Long, 1989; Olmstead & Smith, 1989; Rosow & Zager, 1983; Skeel, 1992). Some employee options investigated include flexible working hours, working at home, job rotation, and child care leave.

One option which challenges the traditional forty-hour work week is "job sharing," in which one permanent job is divided among two or more people. This differs from part-time work in that the employee who job shares is usually entitled to the same status and benefits as in a full-time position (Blyton, 1985).

Admittedly, for many employees the concept may be attractive but not feasible, since half of a job is the equivalent of half a salary as well. Macarov (1982) typified those most likely to engage in job sharing as being the otherwise unemployed, mothers of young children, and those nearing retirement. Granatt (1982) added students to that list. Other individuals who may be interested in sharing a job include men wishing to spend more time with their children, people whose work stress level is very high, employees with plans to further their career opportunities through part-time study, and others who prefer to maintain some job security while they "test the waters" in a new career domain.

Much has been written about the benefits of job sharing. Researchers maintain that the payoff for employers is a lowered absenteeism rate, decreased turnover, and increased morale which results in greater productivity (Frease & Zawacki, 1979; Kahnweiler & Kahnweiler, 1992; Martinez, 1993; McEnroe, 1991; Persuhn, 1992).

Employees who job share are said to appreciate the flexibility, reduced hours, increased energy and the sense of achievement they experience, as well as the unique opportunity to consult with the job sharing partner about work-related issues (Chandler & Johnson, 1990; Friese & Stefura, 1983; Harriman, 1982; Meier, 1979; Persuhn, 1992).

Canadian research on job sharing has been quite limited (Chandler & Johnson, 1990). In the studies which are available, most often the respondents or interviewees were mothers with small children (Friese & Stefura, 1983; McEnroe, 1991; Persuhn, 1992). Meier's (1979) survey of 238 job sharers provides generous and positive descriptions of the impact job sharing had upon the work-related aspects of the experience, but very little is said regarding the positive or negative outcomes in the individual's life away from the workplace. Without evidence to the contrary, one might be left with the impression that most, if not all, job sharers have simply forfeited some on-the-job hours in order to increase the time available to them for family life and domestic chores.

The trouble with such a perspective is that it may not accurately reflect the richness in the quality of life of the job sharers as a direct result of their decision to be employed in a shared position. Perhaps if more

people were provided with a qualitative description of how life might be enriched because they job shared, others might consider joining the movement.

The study examines the experiences of eight women who job shared, and focuses on how the practice of job sharing provided them with opportunities for growth, development and enjoyment in the spheres of their careers, their health, their social lives and their economic situation.

METHODOLOGY

Job sharing is not a common practice in the geographic region where this study was conducted. This resulted in the need to recruit participants through professional and personal referrals.

The eight women who volunteered to participate in the study had job shared for between one to seven years. All of them had chosen job sharing rather than full-time employment. Five had applied and been hired for a job shared position, while three had previously worked full-time and requested permission to share their own job.

An effort was made in the recruitment process to find participants who worked in a variety of occupations. The three sets of partners and two other individuals represented five different employment settings: nurses in an institutional setting, secretaries in a government office, staff resource people employed by a non-governmental development organization, a secretary in an insurance office, and a counsellor in a women's crisis shelter.

All of the women had the security of an additional income besides their job sharing salary. Some were married with employed spouses, a couple had insurance benefits, and in one case lottery winnings provided a source of financial support.

A qualitative approach was favoured for this study to enable the lived experience of the job sharers to emerge (Deslauriers, 1987; Schwartz & Jacobs, 1979; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). During the initial step of focussed interviews, the women were asked to discuss the personal impact which job sharing had on their lives. After describing the structure and creation of their particular job sharing situation, they were probed with regard to their lifestyles and daily activities while engaged in job sharing.

Step two consisted of an analysis of the interview data which had been tape recorded and transcribed. Categories which closely resembled the raw data were identified, and examples were accumulated within the categories until a point of saturation was reached. The four categories which held the most examples from the raw interview data were job sharing's impact upon career development, physical health, social networks and financial situations. This process was informed by Turner's (1981) nine stages in the development of grounded theory.

The results of that analysis were then shared with the research participants, who were invited to comment upon the degree to which the summary of findings reflected their own experience. Their input with regard to the validity of the analysis was requested and considered before finalizing the study's conclusions.

RESULTS

The participants in this research study all described the experience of job sharing as being ideal for them—several used the word “perfect” to describe their level of satisfaction. Those with children still at home (six of the eight women) indicated that an obvious advantage was being more available for their children. One said she recognized that as a parent, she was more diligent in assuring that her children's school lessons were done than a child care provider who either was less committed or unable to supervise homework because of low academic abilities. When she had worked full-time, neither she nor her husband had the time (or energy) to attend to this responsibility.

The interviewees did not end their discussion of job sharing with the positive impact it had on their children, however. Some of the “hidden” or less evident benefits can be classified under the following categories: (1) Impact on career; (2) Physical Health; (3) Social Networks; and (4) Financial.

1. Impact on Career

It was thanks to the fact that she was job sharing that one of the secretaries was able to pursue a second career which she spoke of with much enthusiasm. As a professional singer, she needed to be free to travel, often returning to her residence very late at night. She said this simply would be impossible to do were she working five days per week.

Two of the women who worked a rotating schedule which included night shifts gave credit to job sharing for allowing them to remain in their chosen career fields. They were convinced that working the rigorous hours which their colleagues did would have forced them out of their fields and into work which was less emotionally and physically exhausting. Fortunately, they could remain in their chosen professions: “It's a wonderful way of staying in your field and in your stream . . . you have the flexibility to stay in your work . . . it keeps you where you are at . . . any more hours would be less than desirable” (Interview Six).

Other women in the study admitted that if job sharing was not possible, they would not have worked at all, either because they chose not to work full-time or because a full-time position was not available. They emphasized that by continuing to work half-time, their careers were not put on hold and they were able to keep up their skill levels in their areas of specialization. As well, the fact that they had recent work experience

would be an asset when they decided they were ready to work full-time again.

Job sharing also made time available for professional development. Both secretaries attended all employer-sponsored training which was available and relevant to their position. One of the nurses felt that she was offered more professional development opportunities than her colleagues who worked full-time. When week-long training sessions were available, her supervisor tended to give the job sharer the opportunity to attend because a replacement was only required for two or three days rather than five days. This individual took second language training and now has a high enough level of competence in French to be able to compete for bilingual positions. She also mentioned that she took advantage, at her own expense, of other opportunities on her days off, such as Suicide Prevention training which was useful in her work, but which was only offered to full-time staff years later.

Another example from the research data which indicates that job sharing can enable an individual to enhance his or her career prospects is the Administrative Support person for an N.G.O. in the field of development. She was enrolled in a Master's level degree program on a part-time basis, but found that she was unable to progress to her satisfaction, so decided to share her job: "The Master's program I'm in is a five-year program. I've paid a lot of money and time to be in it. It's a priority for me" (Interview Two).

Pursuing a second career, gaining further education, and finding a work schedule which permits continued involvement in one's chosen field are all career-related benefits experienced by some of the job sharers in this research. The next section will cover some of the advantages that exist in terms of one's physical health.

2. Impact on Physical Health

The negative effects suffered in the area of health when one is employed on a full-time basis were also mentioned by the participants (particularly when that job included shift work). One of the secretaries claimed that both she and her family noted the increased tensions she exhibited when working full-time. She says that she would be interested in a full-time job if it were available, yet admitted that she asks herself: "Physically am I capable of handling it? I look at the other secretaries in neighbouring offices who are there five days a week, circles under their eyes . . . and suffering from a lack of air . . . why would I want that?" (Interview Seven).

One of the nurses had involuntarily moved into a full-time position when her job sharing spot had been cut. She recalled being in better health while job sharing. Often during the interview she referred to her present physical condition: "Since I stopped job sharing (and have been working full time), I've gained 65 pounds. My blood pressure is up. My

body tells me I can't do shift work. I'm out of sync with my body. It has an effect on my health" (Interview One).

The crisis shelter worker spoke of the stamina required to be able to work her grueling shift work schedule. She noted that being there half the time could be viewed in a negative light from a career standpoint, but had been a good decision for her personally because it had allowed her to continue working for seven years without burning out, something she had seen happen to some of her colleagues. Her comments reflect the reasons they may have had to leave: "If you know the work we do at _____, you know what it's like. It's decidedly antisocial. It's inhuman. You're totally wiped out. The scheduling is brutal" (Interview Three).

The above cases represent some of the physical problems which job sharing employees were able to avoid. In order to work full-time, they would have been required to pay with health problems.

3. Impact on Social Networks

Another way job sharing had a positive impact in the lives of the research participants relates to their maintenance and enjoyment of social networks. Having a job gave the women a sense of belonging and gave them valued relationships with other people. Working half the time that a full-time job would have required allowed them to maintain quality social relationships outside the workplace.

One example is found in the case of one secretary, a mature woman who had moved back to her birthplace to become the sole support for her elderly parents. Without her children, siblings, a spouse or friends in the town, she admitted feeling isolated. Her closest friends lived more than a four-hour drive away. She recognized that after working five days, two days off did not allow enough time to warrant such a trip. When she was job sharing, however, every second weekend she had seven days in a row which were hers to use as she wished: travel and enjoy good company. Job sharing permitted her to maintain the social network she cherished.

The social network which was important to another woman was in the form of a support group which met regularly. Full-time employment coupled with an every-changing work schedule for this shiftworker meant reduced opportunities for her to participate in that activity.

Yet another interviewee relied on group leisure activities to provide her with some of her social needs. Such activities as a role painting class and a dance class offered the chance to make friends as well as to unwind. This individual described life while working full-time as excluding such possibilities because such things as housework and child care took up all other available time. Job sharing seemed to permit those few extra hours for fun and socializing.

A fourth job sharer found fulfillment through community service work which she enjoyed partly because it gave her a chance to interact with

mainstream society. As a full-time crisis shelter worker, she fell victim to the oppressive structure of an inhumane work schedule and a very stressful environment which isolated her from people other than her coworkers and the users of the facility. By putting the extra time gained through job sharing to use in the community, she circumvented that workplace hazard and enjoyed a rewarding social network.

4. Impact on Financial Situation

Working half the hours of a full-time position with the resulting loss of half a salary is likely one of the strongest deterrents to a would-be job sharer. Yet the participants in this research also raised some economic benefits of job sharing as compared to working part-time or as a casual or contract worker.

Receiving some vacation and sick leave credits was one benefit greatly appreciated by those who did receive them. Most of the women had prorated benefits of this type. Some continued to be eligible for the medical plan, insurance, and pension plans which their full-time colleagues received.

One woman mentioned that when she approached the bank for a loan, knowing she had permanent employment was an advantage. She may have worked the same amount or even fewer hours than a casual employee would, but both she and the bank recognized that there was greater security with the job shared position.

Some of the women took advantage of offers for more shifts than their job shared schedule included. In that case they could earn extra income during times when it was especially needed. However, they also felt the employer was not expecting them to accept, so saying no was not a risk. They compared this to times when, as a casual, part-time employee, they would hesitate to turn down what was offered for fear that they would be overlooked next time. With job sharing they had permission to accept or refuse those extra hours depending on their own needs, without any consequences.

DISCUSSION

Any person who is seriously considering job sharing has numerous decisions to make, both individually and with the would-be partner. Much of the literature on the subject of job sharing has focussed on how to make job sharing work on the job, including how to broach the subject with one's boss, what model to adopt in terms of scheduling, and what types of jobs lend themselves to job sharing (Friese & Stefura, 1983; Meier, 1979; Labour Canada Women's Bureau, 1990).

The focus of this study was to discover how some female job sharers benefitted from the experience beyond simply having more time to spend at home. It took the perspective that job sharing had an impact in a

number of aspects of the person's life, some of which had nothing to do with being at home.

Some of the job sharing literature suggests that many employers *and* employees still consider anything short of a 40-hour work week as being undesirable (Friese & Stefura, 1983; Harriman, 1982; Labour Canada Women's Bureau, 1990; McEnroe, 1991). A comment made by one job sharer's coworker exemplifies the strong negative attitude which the person job sharing was confronted with: "How can I get this organization to take me seriously as a woman and as a professional when people like you come in and say 'I want to be a professional, but I also want to go swimming with my daughter—I also want to go home and run my Brownie troop!'" (Harriman, 1982, p. 91).

Friese and Stefura (1983) agree that when colleagues and supervisors have a negative outlook on an individual's desire to reduce their hours, it could be a sign that they ". . . feel that job sharers are less committed to the job and opportunities are therefore limited" (p. 22).

The women in this study did *not* speak of limited career opportunities. Instead, they voiced satisfaction for being able to "stay in my stream" and to take advantage of professional development opportunities. Some of the nurses interviewed by Friese and Stefura (1983) cited such professional benefits as maintaining their registration, keeping skills current, increasing their formal educational qualifications, having more time to read about the latest developments in their field, being more involved in professional associations and attending more conferences and seminars.

While job sharing has been considered ideal for persons with a physical disability and/or those who are unable to handle a 40-hour work week (Friese & Stefura, 1983), the price the human body pays for spending the traditional 40 hours a week in a job, especially in one requiring different shifts, is often overlooked. Viewed in this light, job sharing might gain favour with those adopting a preventative approach to maintaining their health. Friese and Stefura state that "Job sharing promotes physical and psychological well-being" (p. 21).

All of the women enjoyed the opportunity their jobs gave them to meet others. Further, having additional time to socialize with friends and relatives thanks to the additional flexibility which job sharing offered was considered very important. Job sharing appears to enable employees to build and maintain high quality social relationships. Recreational activities offered social advantages as well. Perhaps this is why Swart (1978) predicted that "Job sharing may become more popular in future years, especially among employees who want to trade income for additional leisure" (p. 2).

Economically, choosing to job share would at first glance appear to be a disadvantage, since one's salary is reduced significantly compared to the full-time wage. The women in this study, however, did not speak of

financial hardship, in part because they had another source of income to rely on. What is interesting is that the additional salary which a full-time job would have provided could not lure them from their job shared positions which they spoke of in very favourable terms.

SUMMARY/CONCLUSIONS

While the conclusions drawn in this study can only be tentative given the limited size of the sample, the personal benefits of job sharing is an area worthy of further investigation. More in-depth study needs to be done with regard to the impact on less advantaged groups, with samples which include male voices, and with a broader cross-section of occupations represented.

The women in this study described a qualitative difference in their life experience when they were engaged in job sharing. Being free to develop and maintain social networks, taking advantage of leisure and professional opportunities, and enjoying physical and psychological well-being, are all important elements which increase one's capacity to love and to play.

Counsellors who make clients aware of alternative work options such as job sharing are utilizing an approach which McAuliffe (1993) referred to as "... a development-enhancing activity—one that helps individuals to achieve greater flexibility, renew their self-definition, and to live in a transformational, dialectical relationship to themselves and the environment" (p. 27). Providing support during a transition to job sharing fulfills what Schlossberg (1984) saw as our primary goal: assistance in the realization of the client's enhanced capacity to love, work, and play.

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