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# Job Sharing: Challenges and Opportunities

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**J**ob sharing is a concept developed in the 1960s which allowed two people to fulfill the responsibilities of one full-time position. Typically the two individuals involved work opposite shifts or opposite days, depending on the type of flexibility desired. Employers simply must take proactive steps to hire and retain workers. Whether they want to or not, companies have had to implement flexible work arrangements.

According to a survey of 131 companies offering flexible options, 74 percent offer job sharing, mostly on an ad hoc basis (Sheley, 1996). The survey indicated that job sharing has significant benefits, such as a broader range of skills brought to the job by the two job incumbents. The survey also discovered that compatibility of job share partners, strong communication skills, trust between job sharers and managers, and dependability are the most important qualities of good job share situations.

Participating in job sharing can involve three approaches to the division of responsibility: shared responsibility, divided responsibility, and unrelated responsibility. *Shared responsibility* results when two employees equally share all of the responsibilities of one full-time position. In this approach, no formally stated division of responsibilities is stated. The partners of the position are interchangeable and are able to pick up where the other person left off. *Divided responsibility* is illustrated when two employees share one full-time position with a division of responsibilities by project or client group. Job sharers in this arrangement perform separate tasks and provide backup for each other. In the case of unrelated responsibility, two employees who perform different and unrelated tasks are grouped together for an employee head count. Sharers usually work in the same department, but their duties and responsibilities are not linked, and they do not provide backup for each other.

## Advantages of Job Sharing to the Employer

Many organizations have found that employees who job share are appreciative for the job opportunity and, therefore, work harder. Job sharing often results in improved performance appraisals, more participation, and volunteerism from those employees who take advantage of the flexible scheduling and benefits of job sharing. It also seems that companies may be rewarded for allowing employees to balance family and work through job sharing by having focused, appreciative, and highly productive workers. Job sharing allows companies the chance to retain valued employees who do not want to work full-time. In today's work force, many workers suffer from work overload, which can result in burnout. This is especially common with women who have stressful positions at work and a family to care for at home. Job sharing is one solution for women or men who have to juggle the roles of "the executive" and the "family provider." It has been found that job

sharing arrangements also may protect workers from burnout while maintaining productivity. Another advantage comes with lower absenteeism levels, which can often delay important projects in which the absent person is participating. For those employees who are often ill because of certain medical problems, job sharing allows them to work part-time and rest on "off" days. Absenteeism can also be reduced with job sharing because job sharers are able to provide greater service by covering for each other on sick days, vacations, etc. Some companies have also found that job sharing can decrease maternity leave time. In some situations, job sharing might also be an alternative to entering a disability program.

## Advantages of Job Sharing to the Employee

This alternative work schedule gives highly skilled employees the opportunity to continue developing their skills. Some job sharers feel they have the best of both worlds because they can better balance work and family obligations. It is a beneficial alternative for employees who can afford to work less than full-time.

Another advantage of job sharing is the benefits that are provided, because pay and benefits of a full-time worker are split between the two job sharers—unlike normal part-time workers who typically do not enjoy such benefits as vacation, profit sharing, sick leave, etc. Some also feel that two people are better than one in decision-making and the quality of the work performed. By having more than one individual participate in work tasks, errors and problems are more likely to be identified.

## METHOD

A 37-item survey questionnaire was mailed to 470 employees in business organizations in the west Michigan area. Respondents were staff and managerial personnel (32 percent top managers, 28 percent middle managers, and 34 percent staff) who were mostly female (53 percent), between the ages of 20 and 49 (78 percent) and working in branch, divisional, or corporate offices (70 percent). Fifty-seven percent of the respondents reported working for firms with 100–250 employees, with 79 percent of the offices reporting 1–10 persons engaged in job sharing activities. The survey response rate was 43.8 percent (184/420).

The primary purpose of the study was the investigation of the use of job sharing within organizations. All survey items used a five-point scale (from strongly agree to strongly disagree). To determine a generally accepted definition of job sharing and benefit structure, respondents were asked to respond to five items covering the definition of job sharing and the distribution of benefits. Attitudes toward job sharing were measured based on perceived advantages and disadvantages for employers and employees and managerial attitudes. Respondents were asked

five questions in each of the five areas and seven questions to provide demographic information on themselves, their position, and their organization.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results of the survey indicate that the most widely accepted definition of job sharing is two people sharing the responsibility of one full-time position. Regarding attitudes toward the benefits associated with job sharing, the results indicate that employees more strongly than employers believe that job-sharing benefits should be prorated. Next, we examined differences by position. Based on the survey item of still being able to climb the corporate ladder, non-managerial staff viewed this as an advantage while middle and top managers did not. Responses to the survey item on whether evaluations are treated differently, non-managerial staff believed job sharing would make a difference in evaluations, while middle and upper managers did not. Finally, non-managerial staff believed that employees would give the extra effort needed to make job sharing work, while top and middle managers did not.

Employers and employees hold varying opinions regarding the success of job sharing. The success of the program varies from company to company depending on the commitment from the employees and support from management. It requires two people who can work together in a position that can accommodate two employees.

There are many advantages of the job-sharing program for both employees and their employers. The major advantage seen by most employees is that job sharing allows them to have extra time for themselves and their families while continuing to climb the corporate ladder. Additionally, sharers can enjoy part-time hours while retaining partial fringe benefits of a full-time position. The employer benefits from the contrasting input from each partner. Employers enjoy employees who are more appreciative of their jobs and are often more productive during the hours they are available. Job sharing aids employers by allowing them to retain employees who wish to reduce hours while not being required to hire and train new employees. Job sharing also can reduce absenteeism and assist in covering sick and vacation days between the job-sharing employees.

There are also disadvantages that accompany the job-sharing concept for both employees and their employers. For the job sharer, partial pay and partial benefits may cause financial difficulty. Job sharing also requires extra effort in communication between the pair and their manager(s). In addition, after prolonged periods of job sharing, employees may feel incapable of handling an entire position by themselves.

Problems for the employer are generally caused by the negative attitudes of managers. Many managers see job sharing as a hassle and an added expense to the organization. It can also be a challenge to assess what jobs are capable of being shared. In addition, one of the largest difficulties of human resource managers is matching two employees who are compatible. Some respondents also indicated they believed employees wouldn't be willing to put

in the effort needed to make job sharing successful. Managers also fear that allowing some employees to job share may discourage other employees.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As more demands are placed on our labor force, companies need to be flexible and capable of adapting to their employees' needs. The future of job sharing will depend greatly on managers' attitudes and acceptance of this growing trend. As we mentioned earlier, this appears to be one of the biggest obstacles blocking the rapid growth of job sharing. We recommend the following to make job sharing a more acceptable alternative:

- Train managers to be more aware of and accepting of alternative work schedules.
- Develop specific policies and procedures for entering and exiting job-sharing positions.
- Hold seminars with management and employees to openly discuss the advantages and disadvantages of job sharing.
- If employees desire job sharing, place employees who have already worked closely together in job-sharing positions.
- Recruit, interview, and hire personnel specifically for shared jobs.
- Evaluate job positions to determine and ensure that a particular job is compatible with the job-sharing concept.
- Develop a written plan or contract between the job-sharing partners.
- Monitor the effectiveness of the job-sharing positions and terminate the arrangement if necessary.

American companies must respond to their workers' needs, and one available alternative is to implement job sharing. Job sharing helps the organization retain valued employees by allowing employees to work part-time in positions that cannot be reduced in hours or responsibilities. Job sharing enhances organizational flexibility and provides the opportunity to increase the breadth of skills and experience in a single position. Employees are allowed to reduce hours without reducing their benefits or opportunities to advance. While a number of respondents indicated they are aware of job sharing and may have a few employees participating in this work option, it has been slow to catch on as a widely-utilized alternative work schedule.

## REFERENCES

Sheley, E. (1996, January). Job Sharing Offers Unique Challenges. *HR Magazine*, 46-49.