

## **Job-sharing, flexible working and part-time librarianship: a new paradigm for the virtual age**

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### **Summary**

We describe how two librarians at the Health Sciences Library, University of Sheffield successfully undertake the role of Academic Liaison Librarian for the Faculty of Medicine and Sheffield Teaching Hospitals. We comment on the job-share application process and consider the implications of job-sharing a librarian post from feminist, economic and sociological perspectives. The necessity of effective team work is examined. These issues are discussed in the context of the emergence of the new virtual society in which eLibraries, email, blogs, instant messenger (IM) and Facebook are used to deliver library services, thus challenging the concept of the traditional, library based, 9-5 setting.

### **Job-share application process**

The process of making a job-share application is complex, with legal implications for both employer and employee. It is imperative that both parties work closely with their Human Resource department to ensure that all implications are considered. We obtained very useful information from our own HR staff on the practicalities of a joint application and such processes will vary from organisation to organisation. We were advised to complete separate application forms but to submit together with a joint covering letter. We used the latter as an opportunity to make suggestions of how we could share the role and also to give evidence of how we had worked well together in the past (we had previously job-shared a middle management post in the same Health Sciences Library and before this had successfully completed a number of staff training projects together). We were short-listed for interview and were interviewed both individually and together. This gave our employers the opportunity to assess our individual strengths and to observe how we interacted when together, as well as discussing the proposal with us in more detail. It is worth noting that in all other ways we were both seen as strong candidates for the role. We have more than 40 years work experience between us, were sponsored, at considerable expense, by the University to undertake our professional qualifications and both graduated with first class degrees in librarianship and information studies.

Our application was successful and we were appointed as the Academic Liaison Librarians for Health Sciences in 2004. We should point out that although the University of Sheffield accepts applications for a job-share arrangement, in practice, if such an application is successful, the post is split and two part-time positions are created. Over time, the increased flexibility this has given has proven to be beneficial.

### **Job-sharing: social and economic perspectives**

The flexibility of part time working is of particular importance for women, who largely, but not exclusively, undertake this option in combination with childcare responsibilities, [1, 2].

Prior to our appointment there were few opportunities for part-time work at this level of seniority within the University Library, with most opportunities being at library assistant grade. This is consistent with a recent study of women's part time work in Britain, undertaken by Connolly and Gregory (2008) which asserts that 'an insidious dimension of the growth of part time work is the movement of women into ... lower skilled occupations ... [which] implies underutilisation of their actual and potential human capital.' This raises questions of economic efficiency as well as gender equality, [1]. Indeed recent research published in *Gender, Work and Organization*, [3] maintains that many part-time professionals do not see their marginalised roles as problematic, believing it to be a legitimate consequence of their decision to undertake a part-time role. It is ironic that in a profession such as librarianship, where the majority of staff are female, the senior management level roles are largely undertaken by men. We decided to try to challenge the attitudes of many professionally qualified librarians who appear to view working in an unqualified post as the inevitable cost of part-time employment. We believe that many employers do seem to be slowly realising that creating opportunities for flexible working models, including part-time and home working is a key role in the recruitment and retention of skilled staff and is a model which works well in today's society and this is starting to be observed in the literature. Harris, (2004) asserts that good 'work-life initiatives are popular retention tools in a tight talent market,' [4] and as an article by Alison Forrest, (2006), observes 'the costs of recruitment and training are hardly negligible' and in failing to be flexible 'organisations lose the training and development already invested in a worker,' [5].

In addition to the advantages already outlined, the literature cites many other advantages in appointing two people to one post. Not least is that two people bring double the experience and a broader skill mix, [5-7].

We have found that an additional important benefit to a job-share arrangement for a liaison librarian post, where the demands of the job fall heavily at the start of the academic year, is that it creates opportunities for increasing hours and doubling up during this busy period. The traditional perspective of a direct split in the working week is not always the best model and the responsibilities of the job should be considered when hours of work are being planned.

### **The virtual age, flexible work patterns and the changing shape of librarianship**

Is work somewhere we go or something we do? Recent theorists are starting to suggest that with the advent of our new virtual age, the boundaries between home and work life are becoming increasingly blurred. In fact it is claimed that work is taking place everywhere and at anytime, [8]. Perhaps what makes a job-share/ part time arrangement work so effectively in librarianship is how well it fits with the emergence of a new society which challenges the concept of the traditional, library based, 9-5 setting. Health care librarianship is not, and never has been, simply about issuing books but rather is about facilitating access to high quality, evidence based information. Increasingly this is provided via a virtual library environment rather than a physical one. Mediums such as e-libraries, email, blogs, instant messenger and Facebook are commonly used to deliver library services and these create and require opportunities for flexible working patterns with a presence outside the 'office' and the real ability to work effectively from home. If our predecessor had been asked what the main focus of her role was, this would most certainly have been library based. We, on the other hand are largely found to be outside the library environment, involved in planning, teaching and hospital based outreach work, or responding to email requests

for information from home. The boundaries between work and home are increasingly blurred. When we are not in the office together we chat on the phone or by email and use these modes of communication to keep a constant awareness of our work. This mirrors the findings of research examining the visible affects of IT on the average American citizen. It is proposed that in an IT society the technology may increase working hours by infusing work into every sphere of life [9]. Certainly for us the concept of normal working hours is somewhat meaningless. From time to time we are called away from work to look after sick children. Conversely, we can often be found online at midnight catching up on emails and writing blog entries.

### **Job-sharing: barriers**

There are disadvantages to the appointment of a job-share and if the role is to be a success these should be carefully addressed at the outset and not dismissed or overlooked. Undeniably, with a job-share arrangement an organisation has two people to train, two people to communicate with and two people to manage. In addition there may be resistance to the arrangement by colleagues who have not benefited from similar arrangements in the past or who feel that such part-time staff are less dedicated, [10].

However, we found that what most colleagues expressed reservations over was the ability of two people to undertake one job. What if, they suggested, both of you want to take on the same roles and leave the more mundane aspects of the job for the other? What if you both want to take Fridays as your day off? One way to avoid such issues is to consider how a team functions effectively and to ensure that good models of communication are utilised.

### **The importance of team work and effective communication**

Belbin's famous teamwork research asserts that there are nine key team roles and that by employing a range of individuals, characterising the range of roles, an effective team can be formed, [11]. In this partnership there is one partner who has a strong scientific personality and has a flair for financial and strategic management whilst the other partner is more artistic taking on the teaching and marketing aspects of the role. On undertaking the Belbin team role questionnaire, [11] we came out as shaper and implementer / resource investigator and plant respectively. We maintain that appointing two individuals with complimentary rather than competing skills is key in fostering a harmonious working relationship. When harmony occurs communication flows freely. As Pardoe and Shaper, writing in 2000, state 'the importance of communication within the job-share cannot be over-emphasised,' [7]. Moreover, a job-share arrangement does not have to mean two people undertaking all aspects of a job. We have found that by dividing tasks we can work more efficiently and play to our relative strengths. This did not happen immediately and has developed over time, in part as we have come to realise where our strengths lie and also in response to overall changes in the Library structure. Now, four years after our appointment, it would be true to say that we work as a job-split rather than a job-share, with differing job descriptions and different places in the organisational structure. We joke that we have divorced, but this has been quite amicable and we still collaborate on many tasks, as all good teams should.

## **Conclusion**

It is true to say that the job-share application process is complex and it is imperative for individuals and employers to work with their human resource staff when considering such an arrangement. Indeed we suggest that in many cases a job-split rather than a job-share may be beneficial as this allows individuals to play to their relative strengths and may lead in turn to greater efficiency. Additionally it reduces the legal complexities of a true job-share arrangement. Two people bring differing skills to a role and can give a post increased flexibility. The traditional perspective of a direct split in the working week for a job-share arrangement is not always the best model and hours of work should be responsive to the requirements of the job. In fact, the conventional 9-5 working week is not a model suited to changing patterns of library use or indeed to our wider, IT dominated society. Health sciences librarianship is about facilitating access to high quality, evidence based information, increasingly through a virtual library environment and this change has been a key factor in creating opportunities for flexible working patterns. Professionally qualified librarians should feel encouraged to challenge the concept that working in an unqualified post is the accepted price for the reward of part-time employment. Indeed it makes business sense for an organisation to create posts that provide a good work-life balance as this is an effective staff retention strategy. Effective team working and communication are key factors in conflict avoidance and are essential if a job-share is to be a success. We have already said that we more than make up for the time we are called away from work to look after sick children, sometimes working at midnight to do this. Why? Perhaps the answer to this is, in part that it fits with our lifestyle, is facilitated by new technology and is something that society and indeed library users are starting to expect. Perhaps too we are determined to make our roles a success and will go the 'extra mile' to do this. We assert that the main reason is because we undertake a job which is rewarding, which utilises our professional skills and which is also compatible with our home lives. Moreover, we work for an organisation which is supportive and in a culture where we feel we are respected for our own individual qualities and attributes. Part-time workers: business asset or liability? We challenge anyone to prove the latter.

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