

THREE INTO ONE DOES GO!

JOB-SHARING AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO FULL-TIME EMPLOYMENT

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Le partage d'emplois est une solution originale parmi plusieurs autres, appareillant les besoins des travailleuses au lieu de travail. Depuis deux ans et demi, le poste de Coordinatrice du programme des femmes au collège Algonquin à Ottawa est partagé par une équipe de trois femmes. Dans cette capacité chacune d'elles travaille pour 12 heures par semaine. Elles se servent de leur expertise (partagée) dans ce processus pour examiner ses complications, ses implications, ses plaisirs et ses frustrations.

"Is it me?" "Is it her?" These questions may well have been posed by anyone who has contacted the Co-ordinator of the Women's Program at Ottawa's Algonquin College over the past two and a half years. The "Co-ordinator" seems to change not only her voice, way of speaking and appearance, but even her name – two or three times – within a few days! Brief confusion results until it is explained that the "Co-ordinator" function is, in fact, job-shared by a team of three women who each work twelve hours a week in that role. The three of us are Patti Delany, Janice McLean and Kathleen Thomas. We are not typical job-sharers; a team of two is the norm. Neither are we a true example, in that our particular job-sharing is not yet legitimized on an employer-employee basis with institutional recognition of our status. We have, however, developed considerable expertise in the process of job-sharing over our two and a half years, and we continue to struggle with the ongoing dilemmas and challenges.

First of all, some background information. Job-sharing is one of several creative solutions to the problem of matching the needs of people and work that have developed over the past several years. At present, about 3% of all jobs in the USA are job-shared (in Canada, less than 1%).

A job-shared arrangement is an amalgam of full-time, part-time and flexible hours work that holds the potential for the rewards and problems of all three formats. As in a full-time position, job-sharing gives each person on the team full responsibility for all aspects of the job on both an ongoing and a day-to-day basis. As in a part-time position, each person usually works fewer than full-time hours. Flexibility about working hours is negotiated with the partner(s). The catalyst that gives job-sharing its special value is the combination of more than one person's energy, expertise and mutual support.

Most people find themselves in a shared job only after considerable time and effort has been applied to finding a potential partner(s), writing a joint resume, and outlining how holidays, sick leave, tasks, benefits and emergency responsibilities will be shared. Then an employer willing to fill a position on a job-shared basis needs to be found; conditions of work, salary scale, benefits and perhaps union approval need to be negotiated. Finally, such a special employment arrangement is usually carefully documented, lest confusion result in the future.

None of this happened in our case. In January 1983 the abrupt departure of the previous co-ordinator left the Women's Program with only one, part-time support person – just a few days before registration began for the program's twenty Winter Term continuing education courses! The three of us were suggested to fill the vacancy by the departing co-ordinator as an emergency, short-term, job-sharing solution that has since become the accepted (though not institutionalized) way of staffing the program. This *ad hoc* partnership of three women with different backgrounds and expertise that complement one another has developed into a strong team: we were recently evaluated as "effective, pro-

ductive . . . completely satisfactory." We had met each other before, working as course leaders for the Women's Program. We were all at a stage in our working lives at which we had chosen to be self-employed consultants who did not work full-time in any one job.

Patti's background is in small business, and includes heavy involvement with a regional task force on day care. She is a single parent with two young children. Jan had spent thirteen years full-time with the federal government, followed by three years during which she developed her own consultancy. She "lives together" and has two feline dependents. Kathleen's background is in social work and adult education; she has behind her several years of part-time employment. She is married with two teenage daughters.

All three of us had become increasingly committed to working with women and developed complementary skills and networks that continue to benefit the Program we administer. (The Women's Program offers approximately sixty part-time, non-credit courses a year, all led by women consultants, and has a mandate for strong involvement with the women's community as a resource for information, and education). Our ongoing challenge has been to develop processes of job-sharing that enhance the efficient operation and continuing development of the Women's Program. We are equally committed to exploring the potential rewards and pitfalls of job-sharing from a broader personal perspective. The refinement of working procedures has been the simpler task.

While we were familiar with the College and Women's Program, parachuting into the administrative role demanded quick responses to a lot of questions. "Who works when?" was the first. With each of us staffing the co-ordinator's position one-third of the time, negotiations around

whose twelve hours fit where, within a thirty-six hour week, continue to take place every month. Most job-sharing arrangements call for a set schedule for each person. In our case, however, each of us continues to do other contract work. The nature of the Women's Program work is such that frequent evening and weekend hours are involved, attending outside organizational and community meetings, speaking to women's groups and other events. A variable schedule allows the most efficient use of coordinator's time for fulfilling program needs. Such a schedule also allows for personal needs to be met; in addition to outside contract work, things like dental appointments, conferences, children's professional development days, or the wish for a holiday have always been negotiated among us satisfactorily.

The next important question concerns how each of us, working one-third of the time, can know about, and thus share responsibility for what goes on during the other two-thirds. What do we need to know, and how do we get this information efficiently? Our large wall calendar lists who is scheduled to do what, where and when. A time-log helps us to keep track of hours and monitor the equal sharing of time. Three important files on our desk (*one desk for one job*) are labelled Action, Pending, and Mail. Vigilant attendance to these files by each of us not only keeps us up-to-date; it also allows work to be done without delay until the particular team member who initiated it is back in the office.

We do share the work and responsibility *equally*. Thus, there is little task division where one of us alone is responsible for specific things. Apart from being inefficient, it would lead to situations in which we operate merely as three part-time workers who happen to share a desk. The sharing is an essential element of our partnership.

In addition to the key files, we keep two binders at hand. The first is the Diary, in which we record information needed by the other two to carry on with co-ordinating the program, and is a useful resource for writing monthly reports. All kinds of things are noted: requests for speakers at outside events; meetings arranged; comments on correspondence received, with suggestions for response; tasks needing follow-up action; the status of "pending" or "in progress" items, etc. While this may suggest that keeping the diary is an onerous, time-consuming task, in fact, on

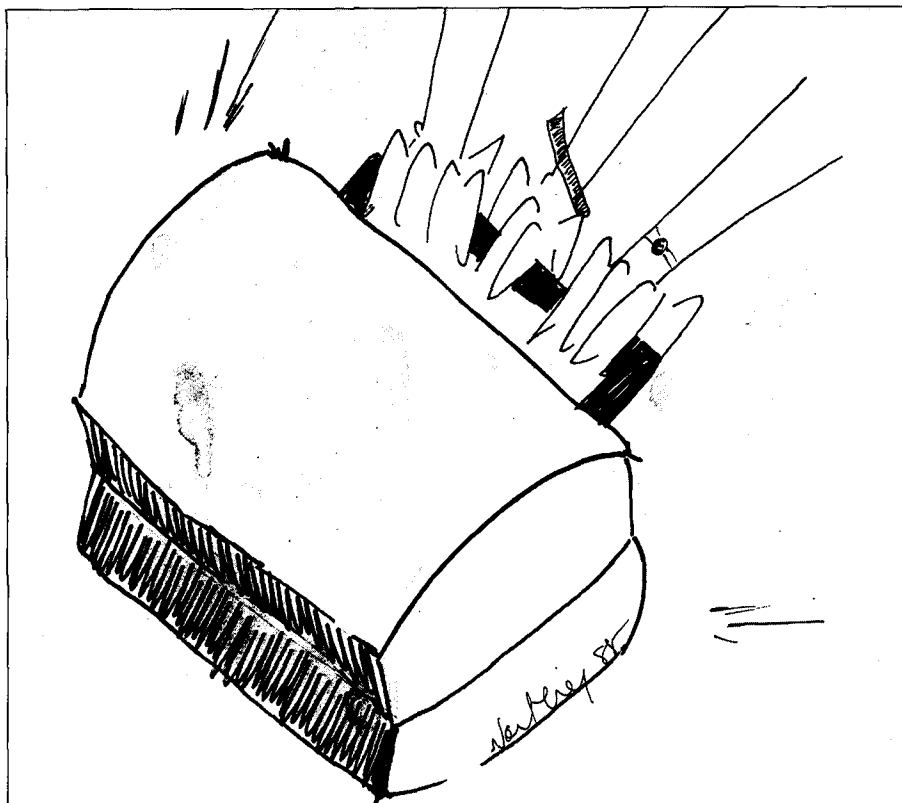


Illustration by Jane Northey

most days we enter little more than a page of handwritten notes – not much more than an individual might keep for her own needs.

The second binder is the Meeting book. While we continue to avoid overlapping our working hours, it became obvious at the start of this venture that we needed some regular time together for planning and decision-making. One morning a week (usually Wednesday) we meet for these purposes. An agenda is prepared over the week by each of us noting items for discussion and reasons why. (For example, "decision needed," "date set" for an event, "course outline to be reviewed," etc.). Functions of chairing, note-taking and "to do list" writing are rotated. The notes and "to do list" are important tools for carrying on with the job efficiently: they serve to minimize confusion about agreements reached, who will initiate action, and what results are predicted.

These weekly meetings and the resulting paper records accomplish three important things. First of all, in many job-sharing situations, considerable expectations exist that the person(s) who is not "at work" will still be available by telephone for information and consultation. We wish to avoid this as much as possible and, in fact, are not usually available in this way. The meeting process and records minimize the need to be "on call".

The second value is the reinforcement of our commitment to share the decisions in a consultative way. We believe the decisions are best reached as a result of three points of view being considered, since our skills and perspectives are dovetailed variations on, rather than duplicates of, each other's expertise.

The third outcome of these meetings is that the supportive values of job-sharing are reinforced. In order to work at all, the systems we have put in place demand a high level of trust. It is essential that we each trust the competence and commitment of the others to carry out decisions and tasks as agreed by all. In practical terms, of course, the needs to plan and make decisions do not always arise in such an orderly way that everything can be done at a Wednesday morning meeting. When urgent needs arise at other times, our agreement is that we will consult with at least one other partner for agreement, but occasionally even this is not possible. From our point of view, equal responsibility demands that consultative decision making remain a high priority.

One additional resource that facilitates our co-ordination is a full-time support person. When we began, support for the program was shared with another program and resources for ours were insufficient. We were able to have full-time restored. The current person, Elenore

Empey, fills an important role. The nature of the co-ordinators' work is such that considerable time is spent out of the office. It is important that someone knowledgeable about the program – and sensitive to the needs of women – be available to answer inquiries, as well as carry on the clerical tasks. While supervision by three might be a potential problem, Elenore has not found it so; nor have we. As the co-ordinator, we work in a situation of considerable independence and minimal supervision. Thus we cannot speak with real authority from personal experience on the supervising of job-sharers.

The development of many of the procedures we use to facilitate our shared work has been somewhat easier than coping with underlying issues. It's fine to say that we use a consultative model for plans and decisions and trust one another to follow through in a competent way. This is a supportive way of working, but it also carries the potential for increased stress. One person in one job is under pressure not to "mess up" because the job would suffer the consequences. Our pressure not to "mess up" is exacerbated by the full responsibility to partners as well. We are able to share the credit for our successes but must also share the consequences of errors and omissions – whether or not we, as individuals, have erred or omitted. Our interpretation of job-sharing does not allow us to say, for example, "well, . . . was supposed to that," or ". . . made that mistake," or even ". . . wrote that terrific report." We are coping with this as an ongoing dilemma.

Women tend to experience some discomfort claiming success as individuals, and our decision not to do so leads us to ask if we are perpetuating this. One example of this struggle is our discussion about how letters from the "co-ordinator" would be signed. If the person who wrote the letter signs it, then follow-up by the recipient may be delayed if they perceive only one contact person. Thus, our correspondence holds the signature of the writer with our three names and "Co-ordinators, The Women's Program" beneath. Another part of this issue became the order in which our names would appear. In general, they are in alphabetical order – regardless of one's actual involvement with a particular letter, memo or report. Does our chosen (alphabetical) order work towards equal sharing? We still struggle with this one from time to time.

Job-sharing carries with it a high poten-

tial for exploitation – by others, the situation, and by the sharers – which we work to minimize wherever possible. While we officially share a one-person position, three people combine more time and energy than one. We continue to recognize the danger of setting up a situation which would fail if one person became the co-ordinator. In practical terms, this means that we avoid having more than one of us working at a time (except for weekly meetings). Because people often perceive us as three full-time co-ordinators, all of us – or sometimes, a particular individual – are invited to events or asked to attend meetings. As a rule, whoever is working during that time slot will attend and explain why only one is available. (Educating others about job-sharing needs frequent attention). All three of us usually attend monthly meetings with the Vice-President of Continuing Education, the person to whom we are responsible, but that is an exception.

There are always more things to be done or attended than one person could cope with and it is tempting to make lots of exceptions. However, a second contributing factor to our vigilance is that none of us wishes to work full-time for one-third salary. Our work environment is often crisis-oriented and it is difficult not to respond to everything. We have an ongoing agreement and need to monitor one another's overtime and responsibilities so that neither one person nor the co-ordinator role becomes overloaded. The crisis management environment also tends to call for each person doing those tasks for which she is most skilled, rather than sharing whatever needs to be done. However, one of the potential benefits of job-sharing is the chance to learn from each other and thus to develop new areas of expertise. We attempt to provide learning opportunities for each other and not always to do what is most expedient.

The priorities of process and tasks are seldom easy to juggle. It is this fundamental commitment to job-sharing as a good way for us to work in order to meet the current needs of ourselves and the program as a vehicle to meet women's educational needs that has held us together into our third year. At times, the stresses do outweigh the rewards and there is always more potential than we can manage to develop.

We have some priorities for the future. One concerns expanding resources of the program co-ordinator so that more development may take place. As a team, we

have reached the limit of what is possible within one "person year". We also feel it is time to legitimize what was initially an *ad hoc* response to an immediate need, but since has become the accepted solution to staffing a demanding role. The arrangement has continued on the basis of mutual trust: we are paid as consultants without a written contract. This arrangement is suitable to us as individuals, but does nothing towards legitimizing alternative work arrangements that others may wish to participate in. The development of personnel policies and procedures that may be applied generally is an important next step. Within Ontario's community college system, union negotiations about job-sharing as an option are at the preliminary discussion stage. We hope that these talks progress and that provision for job-sharing obtains union approval with whatever legislative amendments are required.

While some have viewed job-sharing essentially as a vehicle for women both to be employed and to attend to family/personal needs more easily, wider applications occur to us. Job-sharing may be a viable option for all workers at some phase in their careers, depending on their personal financial situation. (Job-sharing is based on the assumption that either the after-tax portion of the salary is enough to support a person or that the job-sharer has an additional source of income from, for example, other employment, pension, or spousal support. Continuing education, family responsibilities, starting a business, retirement adjustments or the wish for more leisure time all may be facilitated for the mutual benefit of individual and job needs by a job-sharing option. Part of its acceptance as a legitimate way of working depends on an increase in the number of individual instances. Acceptance and development of opportunities to job-share may be further aided by a pooling of information. To this end, we encourage anyone interested to send questions or details of your own experience to us at the following address:

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Kathleen Thomas, Janice McLean and Patti Delany job-share the position of Co-ordinator of the Women's Program at Algonquin College in Ottawa.