

JOURNAL

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How flexible is our future?

Flexible working is high on the political agenda, with both main parties raising the stakes on what they will offer employees. In this they are joining a chorus of commentators, academics and trade unionists suggesting that flexible working is inherently superior to other arrangements, a sort of employment holy grail.

The 'family life', work-life balance argument is not the only one used. Flexible working (including part-time/work-from-home/job-share) will, apparently, improve productivity. New technology - e-mail, blackberry, internet - can cut costs, travel time, office space. Britain's traditional long working hours, it is said, generate fatigue and burn-out, dissipate energy, lower productivity. Routine commuting damages the environment and creates stress.

So why not break up the great monolith of everyone shuffling to work at the same time every morning and home again at the same time every evening. Surely technology, and more sophisticated management styles, have freed us from all that. As long as the job gets done and the outcomes are achieved, why not let them work at the times, and in the places, that best suit them?

The value of flexible working, in some circumstances, for some people, is clear. The family friendly aspect is important. For women in particular, rigid timing and traditional schedules are a real threat. A recent BBC Radio 4 Women's Hour discussion highlighted some of the issues: on the one hand the problems of juggling work and family, the threat to career progression of the perceived 'unreliability' of women, and the skill loss created by forcing women out of the work force; on the other hand the reality that continuity is essential in many important jobs - businesses lose customers, and in some professions, especially medicine, lose much more, when key individuals are not available. It's tough, said one contributor, but illness and medical crisis don't work to schedule.

Inter-dependence is central to all enterprises. I think it would be unfortunate if we were to talk ourselves into a belief in some sort of flexible utopia, with part-time or job-share for those who want it, work-from-home to save office space, and everyone coming to work when family commitments allow. These arrangements have their

place, but best results are usually achieved by the same people working together, at the same time, in the same place, every working day. Variations need to be evaluated, not on ideological or political grounds, but on their practical effectiveness. A range of issues has to be considered.


What type of work is involved? Is it task-centred, with clear start and finish points and autonomy for the employee, or is the work organic, prone to change and dependent on other people?

What role is technology assumed to play? The growth of e-mail, voice mail and all the other wonders of modern electronics doesn't replace the need for face-to-face contact, the real-life interaction of human with human and indeed may add to the stress.

Are 'long hours' really the cause of low productivity? Open-plan offices and 'hot-desking' risk becoming another ideological icon. What of the noise and disorientation, the loss of sense of base? Our legendary long-hours culture is partly caused by conscientious people arriving pre-nine o'clock and leaving post-five-thirty. These are the only times they can find the peace and quiet they need to be truly productive.

How do we weigh the social aspect of work? Apart from the practical necessity of team working, the sense of community in the work place has been shown to be important. Isolation hurts productivity.

These are just some of the questions that need to be examined when considering more flexible work patterns. In helping clients looking at more flexibility, our concentration at Jo Ouston & Co is on the implications of giving autonomy to key staff. What are the communications issues when people start becoming dependent on electronic rather than face-to-face contact? What happens to identity, to relationships with colleagues and customers? In personal development planning, how do you best prepare for more arm's-length relationships?

In this JOURNAL, contributors with direct experience of the issues give their views, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of the flexible world. Identifying the potential problems is the first step to a more balanced, and therefore more productive, flexible future. 

Jo Ouston



Jo Ouston

'continuity is essential in many important jobs'

When Job-Share Works Everyone's A Winner



Kate Hartland had a job she loved, working three days a week in HR at the then quite small London Arts Board. Then she took maternity leave. When she was ready to go back to work, the organisation had grown, and so had the job.

Now the needs of the job didn't fit the needs of Kate's new family. Which would give? In the event an enlightened employer created a job-share arrangement that worked extremely well for all concerned.

Fast forward several years. A senior HR executive at Carr-Gomm, one of Britain's biggest supported housing charities, had had her role up-graded to Head of HR for the whole organisation. But she'd just come back from maternity leave and, in a re-run of Kate Hartland's earlier experience, couldn't balance the growing home and work responsibilities. But she wanted the Carr-Gomm challenge, and they wanted her so they decided on what seemed the risky option - to hire someone to share the job. Kate Hartland became the other half of that arrangement and now believes there was no risk at all.

"This was a win-win arrangement," she says. "Carr-Gomm had the benefit of continuity from a key staff member - far less risky than starting again cold. My job-share partner could embrace her new motherhood role without career damage, and I was able to achieve the family-work balance I craved."

Put like this, it all sounds so rational, the solution so neat, why, we wondered, doesn't everyone do it? Surely there are down-sides? Surely there are risks? What, for instance, about the risk of incompatibility between the sharer, the task unfinished by one before the other takes over. What about the confusion with colleagues and external contacts. What about double reporting, record-keeping, remuneration and insurance - all the admin of one employee doubled up, and worst of all, a gap opened up between them through which heaven-knows-what might fall. The risks must have been huge.

"Of course there were risks. There are risks in every employment decision. But being able to retain someone you know and trust has to minimise them. The key is to identify and understand the risks in advance, and find the answers. The other key is to be open to the advantages of the new scenario and be prepared to build on them. In our job-share at Carr-Gomm the organisation enjoyed a significant net gain. By sharing the job between us, the whole became substantially greater than the sum of the parts.

"For one job they got two different skill sets and two different funds of experience. They retained a valuable staff member and added the fresh perspective of a new one. They

gained from what each partner was able, from her distinctive background, to bring to the party. They had full cover for sickness and holidays. Over all, it opened up a broader field of experience and so a broader vision for the job."

OK, so job-share equals job utopia, in this case. But it was exceptional. The partners were HR specialists, with the advantaged view that provides. Surely for ordinary mortals, for managers in other functions, the same awareness wouldn't exist, so the risks would be much greater, the advantages less certain?

"Of course," Hartland says, "context has to be the first consideration. I've no doubt job-share is harder to operate successfully in some contexts than in others. But I'm convinced that it's not the type of work that constitutes the threat to success, but the type of people.

"If the people look at the arrangement for what they, individually, can get out of it - that is, selfishly - it won't work and shouldn't be started. Job-share is well named. It is a sharing, a partnership, and although it may be instigated for the benefit of the partners, its objective is to benefit the organisation. From that position everything else flows. The details can be hammered out to suit the situation, but the principle should be sacrosanct.

"In my experience - and I've had two successful job-shares - when the guidelines are accepted, job-share is far more than an expedient for working mothers. It's a genuine investment for employers."



Kate Hartland is now full-time HR Director with rehabilitation case management specialists HCML - www.hcml.co.uk

Kate Hartland's Job-share Check-list

- Look on it as sharing the whole job - not chopping the job in half.
- Identify the strengths and weaknesses of the partners. Play to the strengths of both rather than looking for rigid symmetry.
- Assign joint responsibility. No cop-out because 'it wasn't on my watch'.
- Employers: look for absolute commitment to the arrangement from both partners. Same for the individuals - you have to be convinced your partner is as committed as you are.
- Know your potential partner before you agree the deal. At my interview my partner was one of the interview panel. We had the chance to size each other up, estimate levels of rapport.
- Discuss before you start, for as long as it takes, how you're going to divvi-up the job.
- Over-lap is the most valuable factor. We had two 3-day blocks. The over-lap day was priceless. The price paid by the employer was more than recovered in effectiveness.
- Remember it's a partnership. You're sharing not just the job, but the responsibility.

The Frame May Be Flexible But The Picture Stays In Focus



When we asked Helen Waygood, with a track-record of many years' success in interim management (change management is her speciality), what type of person is best suited to that Lone Ranger role, we got an unexpected answer.

"When I was a small girl I was sent to boarding school. I asked my father why, and he said it was the best place to learn the rules, then learn how to break them without being found out."

So you have to be a sort of disciplined rebel for this sort of work do you?

"In a sense yes, as long as you know what you're rebelling against: against being accepted on the basis of status rather than talent, and yes, against those 'school rules' - the sort that say we do it this way because we've always done it this way."

Before starting her interim management career Helen Waygood worked for a boutique European head-hunting company and as HR director in various US-based multinationals. "In that sort of company, enterprise, ingenuity and innovation were foreign words. Corporate wisdom had worked out how to do things, carved it in stone, and threatened to drop the stone on your head if you tried to be original.

"I wanted to regain ownership of my head. Interim management offers just that. Clients are hiring you for your head, uncluttered by corporate prejudice, coming in to get a result without preconceptions or a sense of status. As far as the people you're working with are concerned you have no title, no background. The frame is irrelevant. They only see the picture. Their respect comes, if it comes, not from your past but from what you achieve, right there, right then.

"And even at that, though respect may be important to get co-operation, applause is irrelevant. In fact handing ownership of the result to resident management is an important part of the job."


So is a touch of the St Trinian's rebel the starting point for success as an interim? Helen Waygood admitted that she may have been over-colourful. "But that sort of free-wheeling image is important when you're going into an environment where insecurity, confusion and resentment can have tightened things to the point where everyone's forgotten how to think.

"But of course the other side of the coin's just as important, the side stamped 'discipline and control'. As an interim you have to be a very, very well organised person, with the capacity to be totally flexible at the same time. E-mails and voice mails have to be picked up at any time and often dealt with at a moment's

notice. There's no switch-off at five o'clock. The assignment is your life."

Helen Waygood (while retaining her suspicion of rules), offers a number of qualities she reckons any interim manager needs, to survive let alone to excel:

- The emotional intelligence to help the people you're working with have the confidence to work on their own
- Knowing when to stand back, when to put your oar in (Waygood calls this 'pragmatic diplomacy')
- The ability to influence without necessarily being seen to influence
- Knowing how to act as a bridge, between the CEO who's hired you and the organisation he wants to change
- Confidence in yourself to manage all you need to manage to do the job.
- Communication on a human level. Clarity with empathy.

We reckon most of these have a lot of relevance for any remote worker, and even more so for their managers. 

Henley Research

Research from Henley Management College in 2005, examining the future of flexible working, saw an increase in flexible and remote working as unstoppable, driven not only by legislation and the wishes of staff but also by the advantages for employers seeking to recruit and retain staff in tight labour markets.

There are, however, are disadvantages. Teamwork and communications are more difficult to organise and sustain, managing remote workers is more challenging, individual performance is tricky to gauge and flexible working may threaten organisational cultures. There are particular concerns about loss of control and the difficulty of building and maintaining a sense of team unity.

The research concluded that the competencies required are much the same as those for managing any other group of workers but that managers have to work harder when managing flexible workers. Management needs to shift from 'controlling' to 'trusting'. Communication skills are the single most important competence, critical in building trust and objective setting.

"Communication is clearly both a critical process and an important competence ... relevant to communication of hard facts such as business objectives and to the less tangible aspects of communication, such as social contact, which contribute towards good teamwork and a motivational environment."

Managing Tomorrow's Worker,
www.henleymc.ac.uk/fwf

It's a Mix-and-Match Employment World



Will Mellor, an HR consultant specialising in the service sector, spent many years in HR with major retail organisations.

"In the retail trade," Mellor says, "flexible working is brilliant. It's not just more economical for the employer - it's good for the staff too.

Flexible staffing suits a lot of people's home life needs.

"Flexible working also comes in different forms depending on the trade. In estate agency, for example, it's common to employ some part-time staff on defined hours contracts and some on casual contracts, called on in line with business demand."

Will emphasises the need to plan carefully and take account of particular circumstances. There should always be a core of full-time people for the flexible staff to operate around. The nature of the job should dictate how flexible it can be. When there are no clear cut-off points, flexible working might be only a last resort."

'performance needs particularly tight monitoring'

For job-sharing, Mellor identifies three factors to bear in mind:

The job-sharers should know the whole job as well as knowing each other, ideally have worked together before going flexi.

There should be defined areas of responsibility within the job, so each partner can be credited and rewarded according to performance.

Thirdly, performance needs particularly tight monitoring'. "In one client company, the partners in a job-share were of very uneven ability. For months the stronger had carried the weaker, until a point when her tolerance expired and she resigned. Having failed to grasp the performance issues, the company was left unable to recruit another job sharer and eventually needed to restructure the job. Proper performance management would have avoided this crisis."

"Flexible working and job-sharing do not work for just anyone," says Will. "In my experience it takes people of above-average flexibility of mind to handle job-shares. That and a high degree of insight, responsibility and emotional intelligence. If you're not a good communicator, don't try it, because every time you leave to go home, you're going to have to brief whoever you're working with on the subtleties of the situation. 'The client needs a call' won't do. Only the full picture."

In summary, Will Mellor's experience suggests that while flexible working arrangements can benefit both employers and employees, to get these benefits demands extra planning in the set-up, extra effort in the operation, and extra tolerance from all concerned.



Practice News

JO & Co Team

The focus of our work at Jo Ouston & Co is helping individuals and teams to be successful. Alongside our open course programme and bespoke training for corporate clients, we offer facilitation, specialist skills coaching, and individual mentoring, enabling clients to access the wisdom and experience of our team of senior mentors.

Our office team supporting these activities has seen a number of changes since the Summer:



Sally Marquiss is now Office Manager and also acts as Course Coordinator for our open course programme as well as handling general enquiries.



Frances Jackson, a graduate in Media and Sociology from the University of Surrey, has joined as Training Administrator and handles enquiries, bookings and course administration, including liaison with participants, joining instructions and course evaluations.



Lorraine Higgins is our own flexible part-timer, handling financial administration for JO & Co. She is the primary point of contact for billing, payments and credit control enquiries.

Course Schedule

The schedule of our open courses to mid-2008 is now available and a hard copy has been circulated with this edition of JOurnal. The schedule may change during the year as new course dates are added. The latest version is always available on the website at www.joouston.co.uk > What we do - or give us a ring on 020 7821 8299

Mailing Addresses

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