

Would Job-Sharing Work for You?

Sometimes Less Is More, as This Creative Career Arrangement Proves

By Patricia Schiff Estess

“I fully intended to go back to work fulltime as Director of News Practices at ABC after Eli was born,” says attorney Dawn Porter. “But after the birth, I

felt a tremendous tug to be with him. I didn’t like the idea of part-time work, because I thought I wouldn’t be taken seriously as a professional and because my job is so demanding that I knew it wouldn’t work.”

Dawn’s boss had another idea, though. Kerry Marash, Vice President of Editorial Quality for ABC News and mother of teenagers, knew what she needed to operate the division smoothly. She also understood how torn new parents are between children and career. She planted an idea with Dawn. What if she shared the job with Barbara Fedida, a former producer at ABC and mother of two, who Kerry had lured back to work on a temporary, part-time basis to fill in for Dawn when she was on maternity leave?

“I was skeptical at first, especially since I had never met Barbara,” Dawn admits. “But I called her anyway and broached the idea.” And to Barbara, who wanted to read her boys goodnight stories as well as have a career, the idea was intriguing.

Before they could even consider this commitment, though, they knew they had to talk about their respective philosophies—how dedicated they were to the work, how their styles meshed, or didn’t mesh, and how they could make this arrangement work for them



on a personal and professional basis.

Quickly, they established that they were both Type-A personalities, dedicated to excelling at whatever they do.

They also agreed that, while they were willing to be flexible in their scheduling, they didn’t want to be on call every day of the week—which would have subverted the purpose of the arrangement. With this common vision, they carved out and submitted a job-sharing proposal, which Kerry championed and ABC accepted.

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Their arrangement works like this: Dawn is in the office on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday; Barbara on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. On Wednesday, they have lunch together to discuss any simmering issues, because they appreciate how vital communication and joint problem-solving are to the success of their arrangement. They share the title and split a salary that is slightly higher than the company would pay one person in this position, because the compa-

ny is getting six, rather than five, full days from the team. In other words, Dawn and Barbara each earn three-fifths of what Dawn was originally making. Their benefits (and they both work at least 30 hours a week in order to be eligible for them), such as vacation time, are determined by the length of time each has been with the company.

“No doubt about it, our colleagues are impacted by this arrangement,” says Dawn. “For example, I may have invested three days in arguing with someone in the legal department, and then I’m not there for the rest of the week. It leaves the lawyer feeling somewhat abandoned. I have to be sensitive to this and make it easier for her, either by making certain that Barbara is up to speed and suggesting she continue the discussions with her, or by allowing her to continue dealing with me, even though I’m going to be home.” Although neither Dawn nor Barbara want to make a practice of covering for each other when the other is supposed to be “on,” it happens on rare occasions.

“When you commit to an arrangement like this,” Barbara explains, “you understand that, in a crunch, there must be some give and take, so you have to build some flexibility into your life.” One way both women have done that is to retain their babysitters five days a week, even though they are scheduled to be at home for two of those days.

As for ABC, the company has been generous in its support. Dawn and Barbara were moved into a larger office and given desks and computers to accommodate each of them on their overlap day. They were given laptops, so that if they needed to work away from the office, they could.

Unfortunately, not all companies or managers can get their minds around the concept that two people can share an important job seamlessly. Managers often feel it’s too difficult to oversee, even though, generally, less supervision is needed, because job sharers take on most of the responsibility for making the arrangement work. Companies also tend to be concerned about the added costs of benefits, which are real, but what they often forget about are the

considerable savings to be gained from lower turnover and higher productivity as a result of this arrangement. All that said, if you’re convinced this arrangement will work for you, there are steps you and your job partner can take to sell the idea to management.

The Sales Pitch

If you’re toying with the idea of this arrangement, your first step would be to search out someone who might be a good partner and talk about the idea. Either one of you may have to learn some new skills to round out the position, but that will only

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add to your value in the long run.

Talk to your boss about the idea before making a formal, written presentation. He or she may be able to give you ideas for handling either the request or the arrangement. You will probably be asked to develop a written proposal, which should include the following:

The benefits to the company and the department. Be as specific as possible, making the point that two people dealing with a problem are often more effective than one in coming up with a satisfactory or creative solution. If others in the company have worked in such an arrangement successfully, cite them. If the combination of two people’s talents will enhance the position, make that case. In every way possible, let the company know it’s getting two high-level, well-trained people who can be counted on because they don’t have to be brought up to speed; they already know the ropes.

A proposed schedule. Time configurations for every team vary, but the most frequently cited ones are 1) one person works mornings, the other afternoons; 2) one per-

son works one week, the other the next week; or 3) one works Monday through Wednesday until 1 P.M.; the other Wednesday noon through Friday, both of them overlapping for a debriefing lunch.

A proposed division of duties. In most job shares, both of you are able to do everything the job requires. But, on occasion, you'll have a successful job-sharing arrangement that resembles a good business partnership. One of you is slow, methodical, and pays attention to detail and the other is good at broad stroking and meeting deadlines. If that's the case, you might divide duties to reflect your strengths.

A communication plan. You have to know what has happened on the other job sharer's "watch." You might arrange to leave detailed e-mail messages for each other, supplemented with face-to-face meetings, phone calls, memos, and charts of pending projects. Or you might take communication one step further and share subtleties, such as how someone sounded on the phone, what a supplier told you about his view of the world situation, or what you heard about a colleague's father's medical condition. Sharing this information may seem gossipy, but it can be useful to your job sharer, who will be able to perform her job better when she understands the nuances of what has happened and what has been said when she was out of the office.

Proposed salaries and benefits. Speak to your human-resources department about whether or not you'd be entitled to full benefits (pro-rated, of course) under the arrangement you propose. Your salaries should be commensurate with the position (again, pro-rated) and any bonuses you'd be entitled to would be shared equally.

Sharing Success Stories

Before you dismiss this alternative work schedule as too complicated (and let no one tell you it's easy to pull off, because it isn't), let me share a couple of other scenarios where job-sharing has worked.

Two administrative assistants in the legal department of an insurance company share

an administrative assistant job, because one is going back to school part-time and spending more time with her two school-aged sons and the other is starting a home-based business.

An associate director of development at a large New York City hospital shares her job with a freelance writer, who temporarily took over for her while she was on maternity leave. Three months after the baby was born, the associate director wanted to come back to work—but not on a full-time basis. The writer, who enjoyed her three-month stint but didn't want full-time work because she was writing a book, also liked the idea.

A sales manager for a paper manufacturer was feeling pressured as a result of care-giving responsibilities associated with her mother's declining health. She considered resigning, until she hit on another plan. One of her recent top-notch salespeople had retired and admitted to missing the work environment. When the sales manager suggested job-sharing to the retiree, the retiree jumped at the opportunity. The retiree had a smoother and more comfortable transition out of the work force, and the manager had precious time to spend with her mother during her last days.

Dawn Porter says that she has a hazy image of herself going back full time, but when asked how soon, she jokingly equivocates by answering, "When I'm very thin," or "When the house is very clean." It's pretty obvious that neither Dawn nor Barbara is rushing back to the crushing schedules of yore. Because they have sufficient household income, this arrangement wraps around their lives perfectly—for now. Will it last forever? Who knows?

Would job-sharing work for you? Maybe not now. But, at some stage in your career, it just might provide the personal and professional balance that you need. □

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