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The benefits of job sharing: a practice-based case study

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Abstract

This case study analyses a three-year hybrid job share experience for two women leaders working in a senior management position within higher education. Over the period of the job share a number of benefits from an employee, employer and leadership development perspective were identified. In particular the job share enabled the authors to overcome some of the barriers women leaders face. The multiple benefits of performing a leadership role through job sharing may highlight the opportunity for more employees and employers to consider job sharing at a senior level as a way of growing and developing leadership capability within organizations and helping to address some of the challenges of retaining and increasing the number of women in senior positions.

Context

There have undoubtedly been significant gains for gender and diversity in management over the past two decades, which have been well documented by prominent writers and researchers (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Madsen et al., 2005; Gatrell and Swan, 2008; Stead and Elliott 2009).

Yet, progress remains slow with women remaining under-represented at board and senior levels across most sectors (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Stead and Elliott 2009; Ely et al., 2011). For many women wanting to undertake a senior role, a number of barriers remain commonplace (Sinclair, 2007; Eagly and Sczesny, 2009; Hoyt and Simon, 2011; Kempster and Parry 2014). Northouse (2007) categorizes these barriers into three areas: human capital differences; gender differences and prejudice. He further observes that (2007, p. 278) "gender stereotypes can significantly alter the perception and evaluation of female leaders and directly affect women in or aspiring to leadership roles". Eagly and Carli (2007) propose the use of a labyrinth as a contemporary metaphor that conveys the sense of a leadership journey for women which is often through new ground, with dead ends and set-backs, however, with a way forward being possible.

Within higher education the situation for senior women leaders follows the pattern described above with a shortfall of prepared leaders able to step into senior leadership roles in academia (Madsen, 2012). Although women do advance to leadership roles in universities, "gender imbalance among senior university academics is an acknowledged problem in many countries" (Airini et al., 2011, p. 44).

Airini et al. (2011, p. 59) discovered a number of key factors that play a part in this context: work relationships, university environment, invisible rules, proactivity, and personal circumstance.

Evidence now supports some of the positive benefits for individuals, teams and organizations of having more women in leadership roles (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Taylor, 2013). Examples include several studies which show a small increase in the transformational leadership qualities demonstrated by women over men (Eagly and Johnson, 1990; Bass and Avolio, 1994; Eagly et al., 2003). Similarly slight differences in behaviours have been identified (Eagly and Johnson, 1990) with women focusing more on tasks and personal relationships compared with men. Further there is the opportunity for the "feminization" of leadership which affords equal opportunity for both men and women to develop as better leaders through behavioural changes (Jackson and Parry, 2008).

The White House Report (2009), a report focused on women leaders in US higher education institutions identified that successful women leaders working with students, faculty and staff, provide positive experiences that can help change people's perspectives towards women in leadership positions. Further, these women can act as "powerful role models and mentors to younger women starting out on the path to leadership themselves" (p. 16).

For women in leadership positions the decision to have children and/or to take time off for childcare is often challenging. Women with a family often find returning to work problematic with many discovering that they are unable to return to their former role (Northouse, 2007; Daniels, 2011). Davies (2011) suggests that high levels of female attrition are due in part to the lack of flexible working arrangements. Her 2011 study showed that 80% of highly qualified women wished to work part-time. However, many women perceived that by opting to work part-time, they would hamper their career.

The opportunity to retain talented women returning from maternity leave within organizations through either part-time working or job sharing seems attractive from both an employer and employee perspective (Davies, 2011; Taylor, 2013). However, in many cases the implementation of these opportunities is through roles at a lower level, with less responsibility and for less remuneration (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Gatrell and Swan, 2008).

The Job Share Project, a global, collaborative venture between Capability Jane and seven organizations including Centrica, Deloitte, DHL, Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer, Herbert Smith, KPMG, Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) commissioned a report by Daniels (2011) into making job sharing work at a senior level. The report highlights the feasibility and advantages of job sharing at a senior level. Working Families is a charity and the UK's leading work-life balance organization; in 2007 it produced a report "Hours to Suit" that emphasized the advantage of having two heads over one as well as other benefits such as greater diversity in teams, enhanced productivity, people management innovation and process improvement.

However, evidence from both Working Families and the Job Share Project suggests that although the numbers of applications for job sharing roles has increased over recent years, adoption remains low. Gatrell and Swan (2008) indicate that this low level of adoption can be due to the tokenism from employers in needing to offer family-friendly policies from a legislative perspective but for various reasons finding it hard to implement the policies in practice. Several studies (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Gatrell and Swan, 2008; Taylor, 2013) have shown that for women in management positions, who are able to set up part-time or job shares, continued upward promotional prospects remain limited.

In the next section we will share how the authors successfully initiated a job share at their organization and the benefits this had for employees and employers.

A job share in practice

The authors successfully undertook a three-year hybrid job share while working in a senior management position within higher education. The role was that of Enterprise Manager within the Faculty of Arts, Business and Science at the University of Cumbria. This role was a professional

services position which reported to the Executive Dean and entailed leading a team of 15 staff with an annual income turnover of £3 million.

The University of Cumbria was established in 2007 from the merger of a number of pre-existing higher education (HE) organizations in Cumbria. The University of Cumbria Annual Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Report (2015) indicates that in 2013/2014 the University had 1,096 staff of which 67.7% were women, higher than the UK HE sector average of 54%; 50% of the leadership group of the university is female and within the university executive team the balance is 66% female and 33% male. This profile is unusual within the HE sector which is largely male dominated at senior positions (Ridgley and Rhodes: 14 (Jan 2015)). Job sharing currently makes up less than 1% of the total number of staff employed. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) is the official source of data about UK Universities and Higher Education Colleges. Data from the HESA report "Higher Education Statistics for the UK" (August, 2015), which analyses HE sector data for 2013/14, indicates that of the 395,780 staff employed in the sector, 47.2% of full-time staff and 66.9% of part-time staff were female.

The path to the job share

The authors had followed similar career paths before commencing their job share. Both were born in the early 1970s and after school and higher education had joined in the early 1990s private sector industries (financial services and telecommunications) in which senior leadership positions were male dominated. Both authors achieved early career success in their chosen sectors, both operating in a management role by their late 20s. Sinclair (2007, p. 65) indicates that women in male-dominated industries often achieve success by being "hard-working", "clever", "conscientious" and "dutiful" and the authors fitted this profile. The authors then joined the higher education sector in 2002 and 2004, in emerging knowledge exchange initiatives. The business skills they had developed proved valuable in enabling partnerships to be developed between higher education and industry.

During this time the acceptance of flexible working as a business practice was increasingly being driven by numerous factors including enabling technology, legislative changes and societal expectations (Valcour and Hunter, 2005). The technological advances included laptop computing and smart phones, and legislative changes in the UK included the right to request flexible working introduced as part of the Employment Act 2002 and further amended in 2014.

Why job share?

For the authors the reasons were different. Sarah was returning from maternity leave after the birth of her second child and needed to balance the demands of a young family with her career. While Emma who had successfully completed the role for the 14 months of Sarah's maternity leave wanted to maintain a position at a higher grade with a better work/life balance.

The University of Cumbria was initially resistant to a job share in a senior management role that included the line management of a large team. However, after a meeting that included a more complete understanding of the arrangement of the job share, the numerous benefits to the

organization as well as to the individuals, and the practical concerns over how it could work, the university agreed. The agreement was initially on a three-month trial period.

Photo 1 The authors undertaking their job share: Sarah Stables and Emma Watton

The job share was on a “hybrid” basis with the role split to have shared responsibility (80%) and some split responsibilities (20%) based on individual strengths and complementary capabilities and expertise (definition as per Daniels, 2011). Sarah was appointed on a 0.5 full-time equivalent (fte) basis (3 days per week term time only) and Emma was appointed on a 0.6 fte basis. Holidays were organized to ensure that apart from one week at Christmas and one week at Easter, either Sarah or Emma was in work. The job share lasted for 3 years and ended when Emma was offered a full-time academic position at Lancaster University Management School in the Lancaster Leadership Centre. After analysis the main benefits of the authors’ job share experience are summarized as follows:

Employee benefits

From an employee perspective we discovered several benefits of the job share. For Sarah, it enabled the continuity of her career; the alternative would have been a part-time role in a lower- paid job. For Emma it enabled her to continue to gain the senior management experience that the role entailed. For both authors it enabled us to have a better balance between our work and home lives. For example Emma provided support to allow Sarah to attend key milestone events such as school sports days; Sarah reciprocated by supporting Emma when she had submission deadlines for her MBA. In addition Emma and Sarah knew that during periods of annual leave one of them was covering the role meaning there was less of a backlog on returning to work.

These benefits link to the human capital differences described by Northouse (2007) and the conflict women face in balancing their work and home roles, particularly with the desire to care for children through part-time employment. Similarly, Sinclair (2007) observes that as their careers progress, being hard-working and single-minded in their achievements becomes stressful and unsustainable for women, especially those with a family. The authors were motivated and committed to perform the role well and ensure the job share was successful; the commitment was to one another as well as to their employer. They had an increased sense of wellbeing and ability to handle stressful situations. Because of these benefits they had a higher rate of productivity and a lower rate of absence. The authors’ experience concurs with employee benefits highlighted in the Job Share Project Report (Daniels, 2011) and links to employer benefits in terms of continuity.

Employer benefits

There were several employer benefits. For example, the arrangement fundamentally changed senior managers’ and colleagues’ perceptions about how a job share could work in practice, particularly at a senior level: for example the Executive Dean had had a negative experience of a job share previously where handover and communication was poor. The job share enabled the retention of two key members of loyal staff, as Sarah would not have been able to undertake the role on full-

time basis with two very young children and Emma wanted to work part-time due to personal circumstances. There was always cover during holidays or absence. During the period of the job share the authors voluntarily undertook additional responsibilities to partly cover an unfilled vacancy at the Associate Dean level, for a period of 18 months, saving the organization significant salary costs. The ability to undertake this role can be largely attributed to the success of the job share.

Leadership development

Emma and Sarah discovered multiple benefits from a leadership development perspective which the authors felt enabled them to overcome some of the leadership barriers women face. For example, the authors had increased confidence in their ability to perform a leadership role and were able to observe and learn from one another's leadership practice. They were able to advance their careers and had an increased range of experiences in a shorter time frame, for example experience of working at an Associate Dean level.

The job share ended in 2014 with Emma going on to secure an academic teaching role at Lancaster University Management School; Sarah remained at the University of Cumbria, working flexibly in the same role but not in a job share capacity. Both authors feel that their careers and perhaps perceptions of their worth within their respective organizations have increased as a result of having been part of the job share. Observations on the job share from the Pro Vice Chancellor for Enterprise at the University of Cumbria indicated that she had trust and respect for the authors' professional competence at an individual and joint level and identified both authors as having strong leadership capabilities.

The benefits from a leadership development perspective have synergy with the work of Kempster (2009) on how managers learn to lead in which he describes the importance of tacit learning through participation with leaders observing and learning vicariously from one another. It also addresses the benefits of having a mentor or role model (Hoyt and Johnson, 2011) through a shared, trusted relationship. Further, it links to the suggestion by Sinclair (2007) that women need to validate and identify their own strengths in leadership to be able to progress further in the future. These benefits identified through this case study lead us to our recommendations.

Recommendations

The authors hope this chapter will act as a catalyst for other women who may be considering a job share role to embrace the opportunity as not only a means to achieve a better work-life balance but also as a route through which to grow and develop their leadership potential. Further it is hoped employers will see the multiple benefits for the business in encouraging job sharing at more senior levels within organizations and as a way of retaining or indeed increasing the number of women in senior roles. Emma and Sarah hope it will also help business recognize that job sharing is possible and successful at senior grades, including strategic roles that involve line management. This example is of a job share in higher education; however the Job Share Project report (Daniels, 2011) indicates that this experience is echoed in other fast-paced global companies in a range of sectors.

The infographic shown in Figure 1 summarizes the various considerations and benefits from both an individual and business perspective.

Figure 1 Rise of flexible work in the UK Infographic

Source: Expert Market (2013), reproduced with permission

The infographic indicates a number of key benefits including several from a business perspective linked to business productivity. For example the figures state that a Polycom Survey (2012) found that in terms of cost-cutting the adoption of flexible working practices were two-thirds more effective than operational cost-cutting and flexible working practices made employees 39% more productive (in Expert Market, 2013). The figures state that a report produced by RSA and Vodafone (2013) showed that the overall adoption of flexible working would lead to a 5% increase in overall business productivity as summarized by Expert Market (2013). From an individual perspective research carried out by Georgetown University and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation (2011) showed that 80% of employees report they would be happier with more flexible options (in Expert Market, 2013). Of those employees that adopted flexible work arrangements the report by RSA and Vodafone (2013) highlighted that two-thirds reported greater job satisfaction and productivity as illustrated by Expert Market (2013).

The Agile Futures Forum Report (2013) urges businesses to consider workforce agility (formerly known as flexibility) as key to business growth in the future. The report states that historically agility (flexibility) has been positioned as solely an employee benefit. In the future it urges business leaders to drive forward agility as a strategic business need in an increasingly competitive global market.

The authors would like to propose five steps that they feel would be beneficial for women to consider when seeking to introduce a job share arrangement:

1. Prepare a business case of employer benefits to accompany your application for job sharing. The business case should include benefits that are appropriate for your role, organizational context and sector including relevant reports such as those highlighted above from the Polycom Survey and Agile Futures Forum Report.
2. Consider the practicalities of establishing the job share to ensure the job share will achieve both personal goals and business continuity: for example, hours and days of work; annual leave entitlement; relationship management; and business context.
3. Develop a communications strategy and acknowledge that it is the responsibility of the job share partners to ensure effective communications: for example, an online shared file storage area and joint email account or a process of copying in on emails.
4. Establish a personal contract between the individual job share partners covering the foundations for establishing the job share; preferred ways of working; personal development aspirations and an exit strategy for the job share when these personal goals are met. For example Emma completing her MBA and securing an academic role was an objective of the job share from the outset.

5. Engage, clarify and be transparent about the job share and how it will work on a day to day basis with key stakeholders: for example, peers, direct reports or team members and the line manager for the job share partners.

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