

FLEXIBLE WORKING AT SENIOR LEVELS

Over six million people (including almost one million men) representing a quarter of the workforce now work part-time. This dramatic increase in part-time working in recent years has been primarily in low status, low skill occupations while employers and managers alike remain reluctant to allow more part-time working at senior levels. Common arguments put forward are that job-share arrangements can be confusing to junior staff, that this job, uniquely, needs to be covered one hundred per cent of the time or that clients would be unhappy with the arrangement. Underlying these concerns is the frequent assumption that a desire to work less than full time at senior levels indicates a lack of commitment.

Job sharing: a management tradition

Job sharing - defined as 'two people undertaking the responsibilities of one full-time post and dividing the working time and salary between them' - is the oldest senior level part-time working arrangement and conceptually remains the most popular. To say, "I am in a job-share" is to avoid the negative connotations associated with the term 'part-timer', making it particularly attractive to male employees who tend to be more status conscious. In addition, there is the advantage of full-time cover for a senior level position unlike other part-time arrangements.

When job shares work, they are very successful. Oxfordshire County Council, with 16000 employees (82% of them female) has offered formal job share arrangements at senior levels for many years. Carol Watts shares the post of Assistant Solicitor with Bronwen Buckley, recruited to join her eight years ago. Very importantly, Carol was involved in Bronwen's recruitment. Both women work Mondays and divide the rest of the week between them. The Monday 'handover' is a recent introduction and both say that while the arrangement had been working well, there was a feeling of 'something missing' without it.

Bronwen and Carol share a caseload and stress the importance of getting on with a job share partner: "If you're job sharing you've got to get on with the other person," Bronwen explains. "It's worked well for Carol and me. We tend not to have diametrically opposite views, but even if we disagree we can discuss things."

Job-sharing is also an established practice at Penguin UK. Management have negotiated a structure with on-site unions (MSF, GPMU, NUJ) which enables any job which can reasonably be split to be covered by two part-time employees.

But job-sharing is complex, and not an arrangement to be entered into lightly. For example, Liz Edwards of the NSPCC (which again has a formal job share policy) experienced the down side. On returning from maternity leave, Liz wanted to work part-time. Her maternity replacement agreed to a job share which wasn't entirely successful. Liz says "it's important to have a crossover period, a couple of hours per week where sharers discuss issues and developments". In her case this didn't happen. Nor was she involved in the recruitment of her partner - another mistake, given the need for the two to get on.

In another regional office the corresponding job was split (ie tasks were divided between two people so that the whole job was covered, but with minimum need for co-ordination between them) and Liz observed this arrangement was more successful.

Newer senior level part-time working arrangements

Given the potential problems of job sharing, the wide range of individual needs and the commercial implications of losing expensively trained skills, it is not surprising that the variety of senior level part-time arrangements is proliferating.

Diana Good is a Partner in the Litigation practice at solicitors Linklaters and Alliance. She is the architect of the firm's flexible working policy for Partners. Introduced in May 1997, it applies to all areas of the practice, without being prescriptive (ie individual Partners are free to negotiate suitable part-time working arrangements). Partners must commit to working at least 60% of full-time and the intention is to provide a 'safety net' individuals can use at key periods in their lives to balance work and outside commitments.

So far, between 3 and 5 partners have been working flexibly at any one time, without any negative impact on clients. Indeed, Diana's attitude is that "clients are more sophisticated and more experienced than they're given credit for. Provided a first class job is done, the client is unlikely to care how."

At Ernst & Young, a worldwide professional services organisation, partners have yet to begin working reduced hours, but the option is proving popular with managers. A 'reduced hours scheme' allows employees to drop hours to a minimum of 25 per week for a period of up to 5 years while preserving benefits such as pension and car. Julia Jameson, chair of the firm's Lifestyle Working Party, says around 5% of staff work this arrangement – mostly returning mothers.

At Glaxo Wellcome, where retention of highly skilled staff is an issue, part-time workers make up around 8% of the workforce and their commitment is not questioned. Beverley Jewell and Liz Ainslie have both been promoted while continuing to work part-time. Liz explains: "At Glaxo Wellcome development is based on competencies, and it should make no difference whether you work part-time or full-time; although it can take longer to develop some competencies as you can't get involved in as many things."

And at Penguin UK Cecily Engle has been working reduced hours for the last four years (initially 4 days a week, dropping to 3 two years ago). Until recently the company's Legal Director and now Business Affairs Director for the Frederick Warne Division, Cecily praises Penguin UK for being fantastically supportive. "Their attitude is that if you've got skills they want, they're not going to run the risk of losing you by being inflexible. It's been a big factor in keeping me with them," she says.

Anna Allan is co-author of the CIPD's good practice guide on Part-time Workers published in 1999 (ISBN 0-85292-813-0).