

Job-sharing: A Model for the Future Workplace?

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All Praesta coaches have had senior level business careers – many were Board members, CEOs, partners or managing directors of major organisations in their first careers. Thorough training, continual professional development and regular supervision are integral to maintaining high standards. As well as one to one coaching, Praesta coaches work with teams, conduct board effectiveness reviews and are leaders in working with executive women.

Praesta Insights pull together ideas and experience about topical leadership issues in an accessible and digestible way. We work closely with leaders in different spheres on thought leadership. This publication has been researched and written by Praesta coaches Hilary Douglas and Peter Shaw.

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Introduction

In our coaching practice we meet an increasing number of job-sharers who want to tell their story - and others who would like to explore job-sharing if they knew how to go about it. We are seeing evidence from them and their managers that job-sharing is not just about meeting participants' personal needs, important though that is. In the right circumstances, there can be significant benefits for 21st century employers. We have talked to those who have had positive experiences, and those for whom job-sharing has not worked so well. In this booklet we highlight what we observe to be the key criteria for success, and the challenges that need to be addressed by all parties.

Job-sharing can be found at all levels of an organization, and in all types of role. There is some evidence that the latest generation of recruits see flexible working practices as a definite plus in an employer. However, for the purpose of this booklet, we have talked mainly to senior leaders and managers, and all quotes come from people who carry significant leadership responsibilities. We are extremely grateful to them all for their time.

The booklet is divided into sections:

- **What is the potential prize for an employer?**
- **How can employers maximise the likelihood of job-sharers succeeding?**
- **What do job-sharers need to know?**
- **Keeping a job-share healthy**
- **Challenges to watch out for**
- **Issues for managers**
- **Where does coaching come in?**

We conclude with key points for reflection, setting out questions for organisations to ask themselves, and questions for individuals contemplating entering a job-share.

What is the potential prize for an employer?

Employers are increasingly using flexible working practices to help them attract and retain their best talent. This is not only about women and it is not only about childcare. Men have caring responsibilities too. Women and men without those caring responsibilities may sometimes want to study, write, volunteer in their community, or reduce their hours on the road to retirement or to a career change.

A growing number of individuals are prepared to trade off some loss of income to make space for their other commitments, and still want to contribute in challenging roles. There is a growing view that a job-share arrangement can be fairer to colleagues than part time working, because the role is fully covered throughout the week.

Part time working, nine-day fortnights and compressed hours are already available in many organisations. Technology allows far more people to work from home for part of their time. Job-sharing develops the concept of the flexible workplace and offers something more to the employer. This is because:

- the job-share partnership may bring a set of skills, styles, perspectives and experience unlikely to be found in one person. This can have value for everyone they work with – upwards, downwards and sideways. When a team is in brainstorm mode, having input from both partners can be invaluable.
- job-sharers tend, in our experience, to be highly motivated and determined to show that two heads can be better than one.
- job-sharing offers talented people the incentive to stay in an organisation, in roles that develop their capabilities and advance their careers. This can be in contrast to part-time roles, which are too often seen by their occupants as leaving them on the sidelines marking time.
- successful job-sharers coach and learn from each other. This mutual mentoring can reduce the demand on their manager to be a sounding board and can provide support in times of stress – for example, when dealing with poor performance or an unexpected crisis.
- a senior job-share can draw on both of the sets of networks that the partners bring with them
- a job-share offers the flexibility of being able to have say 1.2 FTEs working in a heavily loaded post.
- whatever their commitments on their non-working days, some job-sharers find that their subconscious works on a problem during their time away from the job. This enables them to tackle the issue with renewed energy and perspective when they return.
- If one partner is ill or on holiday, the other provides a degree of continuity that would not otherwise have been there.
- Job-sharers believe they are more resilient in a very busy period than single post holders, because each partner has more available recovery time.

"I held back from applying for a senior job that I knew I could do, because I feared I would have no space to do other things in my life. My ambition changed when I discovered job-sharing. People thought it was a strange thing for a man to do, but I couldn't be happier or more motivated."

How can employers maximise the likelihood of job-sharers succeeding?

There are risks for an organisation as well as benefits. We see the risks being managed well where the employer:

- creates a marketplace where potential job-sharers can contact each other and explore best fit. Some organisations hold a job-share register; others may have more informal online communities.
- gives evidence in job adverts that job-share applications are genuinely welcome, and that recruitment arrangements have been thought through.
- ensures there are HR policies for managing job-shares.
- provides advice and guidance to both job-sharers and managers, including the availability of mentoring or coaching where appropriate.
- removes practical barriers to effective job-sharing e.g. by scheduling management meetings so that the partners have similar opportunities to participate over a period of time.

- provides the technology options for the job-share partnership to operate as one.
- encourages job-sharer networks, whether real or virtual.

Employers often ask whether certain roles lend themselves to job-sharing better than others. We have seen successful partnerships in a wide range of roles. The more challenging and fast-moving the job, the more commitment seems to be required of the partners, but the key is to test for that commitment, rather than to assume it cannot be done.

It has been suggested that a partnership can't work without the partners knowing each other well beforehand. An existing relationship provides a good start, yet we also see evidence of partners meeting each other for the first time, and running a successful job-share. In either case both people must do their due diligence before they sign up. They need to understand the other person's abilities and skillset, and their personality, career aspirations, style of working and how they are likely to respond to pressure. A wise employer will insist that this due diligence and careful preparation happens, to avoid potential problems later.

What do job-sharers need to know?

The key learning from experienced job-sharers is:

- accept that the job-share is one and indivisible. Bring a mindset of collective responsibility and consistent communication to every task and relationship. The success of the role subsumes the success of the individual partners. Everything they do should demonstrate that they are committed to each others' success.
- choose a partner you would completely trust to run with the job in your absence. You may have different styles and personalities but you need to believe that their judgement is likely to be as right as yours is. You need a mindset that you will not want to let your partner down.
- never skimp on the handover conversations. Prepare for them properly, whatever else is going on. Treat them as an opportunity to think things through together, listen to each other's perspectives and do some co-coaching. The handover is as much about planning ahead and prioritising, as it is about updating on the events of the last few days. Periodically review the handover arrangements and enable them to evolve over time.
- talk to the line manager about their needs and how these can be met. Explore whether catch up meetings with the line manager might be on a handover day when both partners are present.
- invest in key stakeholder relationships, so that they trust each of you as individuals but also trust the partnership.
- provide the team with consistent

management and leadership. Do not get into a position where one partner can be played off against the other.

"Job-sharers cannot be competitive with each other, as they have to operate as one person. It's important to keep any disagreements to private discussion."

"People constantly muddle up our names, as though we were twins. We don't mind, because that means we are being heard as one voice."

"Learning to lead as two, rather than one, has been the biggest journey for us."

There are other practicalities that need to be addressed at the outset, before they become a barrier to success:

- agree how many and which days each partner will work and what to do if the partners are at different locations. If the working week typically sees the high-profile events happening on a particular day, how will the partners ensure they both get exposure to key people and meetings?
- decide whether each person is to cover the full range of the job or whether some aspects become the sole or prime responsibility of one or other partner. Communicate this clearly to others.
- agree whether and how to keep each other up to date outside of the formal handover sessions: are any decisions so urgent and important that both partners need to be involved?

- set up a joint email account for the job-share, with a footer that explains how the job-share works and how people can make contact. Get advice on how other technologies can support efficient working.
- be clear how people invite the job-share to a meeting. Get others used to seeking the view of the a job-share, rather than the view of one of the individuals.
- talk with the team about how both partners will input to objective setting and performance assessment, even if the conversations with individuals are split between the partners.

The arrangements need to be dynamic, and capable of evolution as circumstances change. There needs to be regular review about what should be changed and adapted. Keep asking: 'How does this make us more effective in delivering our objectives?'

Every job-sharer tells us that communication is key. As soon as there is a hint of a problem or misunderstanding, there needs to be open conversation about how to learn from experience and adapt the ways of working.

"You need to take it in turns to deal with the less exciting stuff, as well as the high profile work."

"Preparing for, and doing, the handover is my thinking time in the week. It forces me to think through what has happened, and articulate what needs to happen next. If I can't fully articulate the latter, I know I will work it out in talking to my partner."

Keeping a job-share healthy

Investment in the relationship is critical, whatever the pressures and distractions. Job-sharers tell us it is particularly important to get regular feedback from the manager, the team and all key stakeholders, to find out what is working well or not so well. Staff surveys and 360 feedback exercises are helpful but probably not frequent enough to be the sole source of feedback. They may need supplementing - for example by encouraging team members to give quarterly feedback on how the job-share is impacting on them, anonymously if they wish.

As part of their conversations, the partners need to anticipate potential problems between them. There will be subjects on which they think different approaches are needed: how are they going to handle such differences when they arise? Similarly, something is likely to go wrong at some point on one partner's watch: are they going to agree upfront that they will always take joint responsibility?

It is wise to talk in advance about how a job-share partnership might end, recognizing it is unlikely to go on indefinitely. What if the ideal development opportunity comes up for one partner and the other wants to grow in a different direction? What if there are differences about preferred location, or readiness for promotion? What if their performance as individuals becomes seen as markedly different? The partners need to agree how they are going to balance their commitments to each other with their individual aspirations. More than once, we heard this likened to agreeing a "pre-nup."

"We share a highly stressful and responsible job but I couldn't be enjoying it more. That has everything to do with the job-share."

"It's a bit like a relay team. You hand the baton over to the refreshed partner, who is not yet frustrated by the latest happenings and can start Wednesday with a smile."

"The two of us are some of the calmest people around. That's because we can talk things through in a safe and non-judgemental space."

Challenges to watch out for

Inevitably, and as in any working relationship, things can go wrong. The most common problems that people mentioned are:

- underestimating what is required to make a smooth handover, especially in the middle of a fast-moving set of events
- lack of trust in each other's commitment to the partnership, especially when the going gets tough
- insufficient investment in understanding each others' skills and styles, and in surfacing disagreements
- different expectations about standards of performance for self and others
- incompatible approaches to leading the wider team

- inconsistent approaches to partners and stakeholders.
- evidence that others always prefer to work with one of the partners, and /or want to drive a wedge between them
- a risk of dividing the work so as to match each others' strengths, and therefore limiting the potential for each partner to learn and grow
- the possibility of reinforcing each others' prejudices and losing diversity of thinking
- a risk that colleagues who are allocating corporate tasks forget that the job-share adds up to not much more than one FTE, and expect each partner to contribute as much as a full-timer.
- a corresponding risk in management discussions that the job-share partners try to double the vote they bring, to the annoyance of others.

Some of these challenges are unique to job-shares, but often they are little different from the challenges that can face leadership teams. As with teams, the best approach is to create space to stand back and analyse what is happening. It is never easy to do this in a busy and highly charged environment, but investing time and thought up front reduces the risk of discord later.

An overdeveloped sense of loyalty to, or dependence on, your partner can mean that problems in the working arrangements are not tackled soon enough. The golden rules are:

- don't duck the conversation. Keep talking frankly with each other and name potential differences early

- if the problems can't be solved by the partners alone, explore a way forward with a coach, facilitator or boss.
- accept that some relationships don't work out or were right for a season, and find a way of parting with good grace and without recrimination.
- there may be an issue about differential performance within the job-share, though from what we hear, this does not happen often, because job-sharers tend to self-select for capability. If it does happen, the manager needs to discuss with the partners whether and how they can make the partnership sustainable.

"If I am feeling stressed about the job, I always remind myself not to take it out on my job-share partner. He is part of my support and solution."

"As soon as you become competitive with your job-share, the partnership is at risk of going into a tailspin."

Issues for managers

As well as what we have said above, there are some specific areas for managers of job-sharers to think about.

- if a post is advertised as open to job-sharers, how should the recruitment process work? It is generally up to the manager whether they ask for a joint application and joint interviews, or whether they consider each partner separately. Whatever they decide to do, they need to talk to the partners together at some point, to test whether they have a convincing plan for working together.
- each partner will need their own discussions with their manager about their personal development, as well as the discussion about the performance delivered by the job-share. Personal development for one partner may sometimes include acquiring the skills that come naturally to the other one.
- there needs to be regular two-way feedback between the manager and the job-share to spot whether the partnership might be ending. If one partner leaves, either temporarily or permanently, the manager needs to discuss with the other partner whether they want to change their own working pattern, whether they wish to operate singly for a short period, or whether a new partner should be recruited.
- the manager needs a mechanism for checking that the jointly-led team is thriving
- there will be practical issues such as arranging team meetings or events so that both job-sharers have the opportunity to participate.
- there are salary costs attached to the day of overlap between the job-share partners, and these need to be budgeted for.

All of the above means that the initial time commitment for the manager of a job-share is likely to be greater than for the manager of one full-timer. This extra load can continue if there are performance or pastoral issues, or tension between the partners – but on the other hand, we have heard successful job-sharers say that they consume their own smoke by acting as each others' counsellor.

Managers reflect that job-sharers have to be exceptionally conscientious about making the arrangements work, and that, even then, substance and nuance may get missed from time to time. The compensating benefit, for the team, for peers and for the wider community, is the diversity of knowledge, experience and opinion that is brought to the role, without having to pay for two people.

Not every job-share is a success, but the same could be said of teams.

"I have thoroughly enjoyed the experience of line managing a job-share. That's very largely because of the way that the partners have approached it: determined to make a success of it, compensating when necessary, and ensuring there is never daylight between the professional positions that they take, even when their personal views might differ... I am a convert, and very glad to have tried it."

"Interviewing a pair of job-sharers was exciting. They doubled the ideas and opportunities available to us, combined with their joint breadth of experience. They also reinforced our belief in a diverse, inclusive and flexible workforce."

"As an HR Director, I have encouraged part-timers to pair up in job-shares, so that we get proper coverage of roles. It is much more satisfactory in terms of accountabilities."

Where does coaching come in?

Job-sharing works where two well-matched individuals have a strong sense of shared purpose and know how to get the best out of each other. Building such a relationship does not always come easily. A good coach creates a safe but challenging space for open conversations, and can help the partners to:

- share insights into their personalities, preferences and possible blind spots
- recognise and accommodate their different needs – for example, one partner may want full written briefing ahead of the handover meeting, whilst the other learns best by talking
- evolve a shared language, and check for shared understanding
- be totally honest about the things they find irritating or awkward in the partnership
- confront any risk of groupthink, or of being too polite to challenge each other
- look at problems from a fresh perspective
- work their way through any difficult patches and come out stronger
- anticipate what might get in the way of a line manager or stakeholder being fully supportive of the arrangements.

For many job-share partnerships, individual coaching sessions have complemented three-way conversations. In other cases, coaching is always with the pair together. Whilst many partnerships are extremely effective at coaching each other, an element of external challenge can take them the extra mile.

“My job-share partner and I have been together for nearly 7 years, in a couple of different roles. We went through quite a challenging time about a year ago. We have always been very honest with each other, but the support of a coach who knows us both well was invaluable. He helped us explore and air the underlying issues-individually and as a pair- and to plot a way to move on from them.”

“As a job-share, we thought we were working well, but our first coaching session helped us appreciate that we had simply started to live with some tension between us. Coaching helped us identify the issues and how best to address them. The end result was a far more effective working relationship.”

Future developments

During our conversations we heard how the notion of the job-share is prompting fresh thinking about job design:

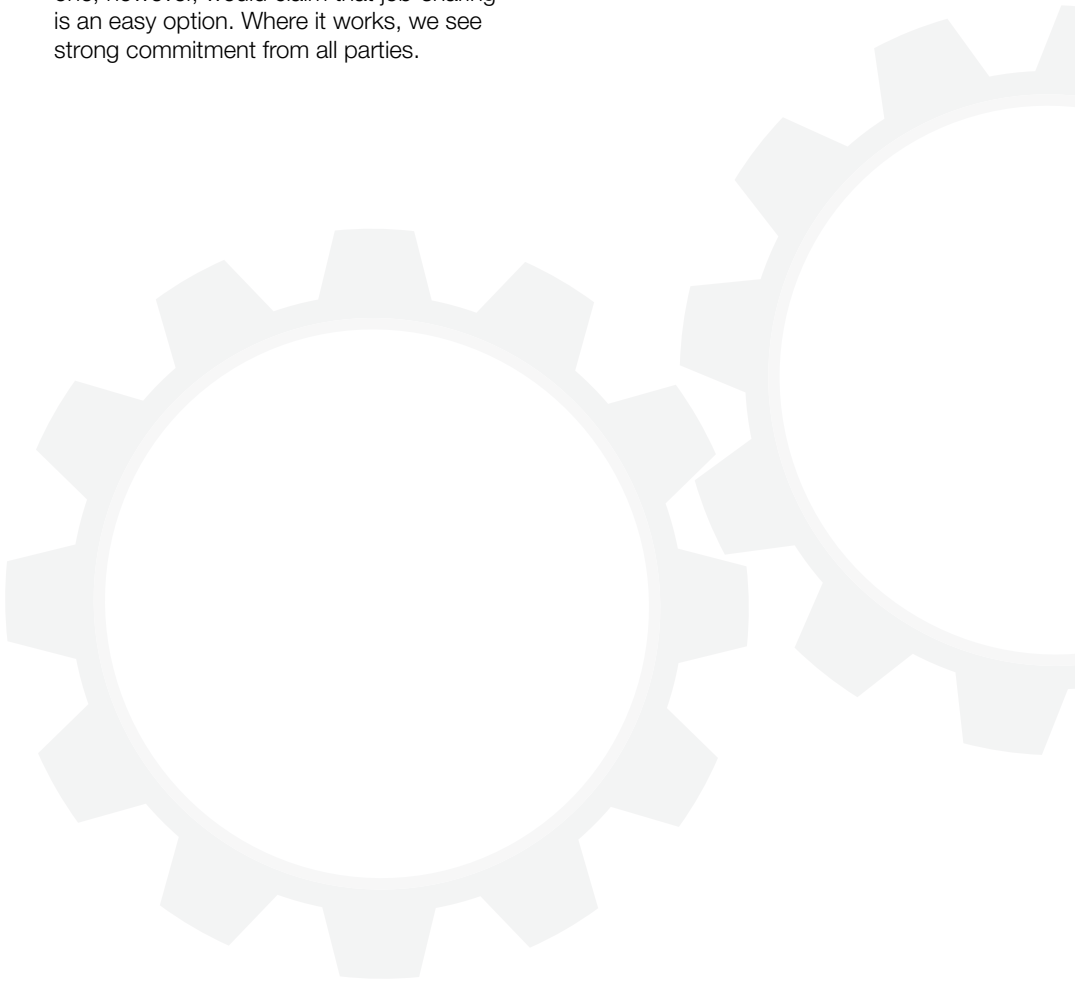
- One senior manager talked about “job-carving”, where two part-timers are not suited to a full job-share, but are given overlapping roles with an incentive to collaborate
- An expert in major projects pointed out that job-sharing is omnipresent on construction and manufacturing sites as soon as multi-shift working is introduced. On-site leads build in structured handovers, safety briefing and data sharing as a way of life
- We met a partnership where both partners work full-time, but they manage their teams jointly on a shared remit, and cover for each other
- In two examples, one role was done by two job-share partners committing three days each, whilst one of the pair undertook a different role in the organisation for the two remaining days of the week.

We also heard how people now in full-time leadership roles look back on their job-sharing experience:

“The learning from a job-share partnership stays with you forever. It enhanced my skills at matrix management, empathetic leadership, boundary-setting, coaching and personal resilience. I did it at the time for practical reasons, but I can honestly say it was transformative.”

Conclusions and points for reflection

We are seeing evidence that effective job-share partnerships bring positive benefits to an organisation, and outweigh the additional transaction costs. They will often provide a breadth of knowledge, experience, and approach that is not found in an individual post-holder. They can ensure better continuity, resilience and perspective. No-one, however, would claim that job-sharing is an easy option. Where it works, we see strong commitment from all parties.



Key questions for organisations to ask themselves

1. How could well thought-through job-share arrangements enable us to retain and develop more of our talent?
2. How could job-sharing support our aspirations and values, and our attractiveness as an employer?
3. What lessons can we draw from where job-share or other flexible working arrangements have been successful?
4. What are the attitudes or working practices that could get in the way of effective job-share arrangements, and how could we address them?
5. In what practical ways are we willing to support job-sharing through advocacy, shared learning and coaching?

Key questions for individuals contemplating a job-share

1. What are the personal and professional benefits for me of joining a job-share?
2. Am I prepared to accept some transactional costs for the benefit of being in a role that fully uses my skills and experience?
3. How willing am I to work in a partnership where I seek to build complete reliance and trust, with no blame when things go wrong? Am I willing to subjugate my personal view or preferences in the interests of the job-share?
4. How much will I benefit from the mutual support and mentoring that a job-share partner will provide, without becoming over-dependent?
5. Can I reconcile the emotional investment in a job-share partnership, with the need to keep assessing how well it is serving the organisation?

Publications by the same authors

The Reluctant Leader: coming out of the shadows

by Peter Shaw and Hilary Douglas, Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2016

The Resilient Team

Booklet by the same authors in the Praesta Insights series, available from the Praesta website at www.praesta.co.uk

Why are there still so few Women on Executive Boards?

Report from Hilary Douglas and Mairi Eastwood, available on the Praesta website

Wake Up and Dream: stepping into your future.

by Peter Shaw, Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2015

100 Great Handling Rapid Change Ideas

by Peter Shaw, London, Marshall Cavendish, 2018

Praesta Partners have published a number of Praesta Insight documents which can be downloaded from the Praesta website:
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Both Hilary and Peter have worked extensively with job-share partnerships in senior roles and have experienced at first hand the very positive contribution of job-share partnerships in a variety of different contexts.

Recent collaborations are the book '*The Reluctant Leader: stepping out of the shadows*' (2016) and the Praesta Insight '*The Resilient Team*' (2017).

Hilary and Peter draw from their wider experience of leadership roles. Hilary is a Vice Chair on the Board of the British Red Cross. Peter is a Visiting Professor of Leadership Development at four UK Universities and is the Chair of Guildford Cathedral Council.

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