

idea corner

Job-Sharing

Ever wanted to cut your job in half? Spend half the time, doing half the work, for half as much stress and half as much pay? After three years in our positions as Extension communication specialists, we did. And we won administrative approval for it by combining our two halves into one shared position. Then, we hired a third person to do the remaining two halves of our original positions.

We started with separate job responsibilities and we still have separate job responsibilities. Diane handles all the the news release writing, publication editing, and miscellaneous writing and consulting needs for the food/nutrition and EFNEP programs. Jane has similar responsibilities for consumer resources and management, family economics, and institution management. The other halves of our original positions (housing/energy and art/design) are now handled by a new employee.

The idea of job-sharing had been on our minds for nearly a year before we presented a written proposal to our supervisor. Both of us were trying to manage full-time jobs, plus graduate school, family life, and other outside interests. When we found that each of us was expecting our first child within two months of each other, we gave more thought to the job-sharing idea. It was a way to increase our time at home, while still pursuing our careers.

One of the most difficult parts was thinking through how it would affect us personally. Could I manage on half a salary? Was I really ready to give up half my responsibilities? Which ones? Who would take over those responsibilities so the department wouldn't suffer? Was my ego ready to deal with the stigma attached to "part-time" work? Would my career advancement suffer? How would my spouse react to the idea? Did my co-worker and I respect each other enough to share an office and job responsibilities? Could I really do half the work in half the time? How would I avoid working full-time for half the pay?

Only after answering those questions individually could we hope to work out the details of a team proposal.

During this time, we also searched for help from others who had done what we were thinking about doing. Surely anything that sounded that good had to have some drawbacks. What were they? We wrote to every group we read or heard about and eagerly reviewed the materials.

We checked with the university personnel office on how salaries, benefits, sick leave, and vacation time were presently handled for part-time employees. Were other university employees already sharing a job?

Finally, we drew up a list of alternatives and discussed them with our supervisor:

1. Could we share one position and hire a new person to do the other halves of our jobs?
2. If only one of us wanted to cut back, could the other position be split between one of us and a graduate assistant?
3. Could we have any assurance that if one of us quit, the other could go back to a full-time position, if desired?

Fortunately, appropriate administrators felt job-sharing was a worthwhile idea. They were willing to listen to our plan and explore ways to make it work. It was our responsibility to get the wheel rolling and to keep it rolling.

With that verbal go-ahead, we wrote and rewrote our proposal. We tried to address every possible question and circumstance that could arise.

Within two weeks of our turning in the written proposal, we had approval for job-sharing to start immediately.

Our proposal had stated our exact working times and job responsibilities, so we were ready to go. We'd included a request for the continued employment of a summer intern through the fall semester until a new person could be hired. We'd spelled out how office space and equipment could be rearranged.

We've tried to maintain an attitude in ourselves and in our co-workers that this is a pilot project; we welcome suggestions about how to improve this work arrangement. We consider ourselves professionals and want to be treated as such. Working half-time is great, but it does take discipline—to produce during a limited number of office hours and to communicate with each other and co-workers about projects, office happenings, and personal matters.

For some employees and some organizations, job-sharing is a promising alternative to full-time work. It gives employees the free time they desire. A more satisfied employee equals less stress and increased productivity.

To make job-sharing work, it must be voluntary and have the full support of supervisors. Job-sharers must have benefits, salaries, and responsibilities equally prorated when compared to full-time co-workers. Expectations must be clearly stated and communication patterns well-established.

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