JOB SHARING AT MONTGOMERY COUNTY

by

Rhoda Sandler with Judith Platt

At a recent library conference, when I mentioned that I shared my job as a media librarian, it turned out that everyone had read about job-sharing, but no one had ever met a real life work sharer. They questioned me as to how it happened, how it works, and finally extracted a promise to write about it so that employers might be encouraged to try work sharing and librarians to press for it. Technically, I am not a job sharer since my partner and I have different titles and different job descriptions, but quite clearly, we do in fact share the professional work of an audiovisual services department.

In 1968, newly graduated from library school, I started as audiovisual librarian at Montgomery County Community College on a 21-hour, ten month-a-year basis. The AV department consisted of a dusty pile of gift records, and there was no need nor money for a full-time librarian. I wanted only part-time work and so the first step was taken.

During the next few years, with enrollment swelling and a move from cramped make-do quarters to a multimillion dollar campus, the AV Department grew from that heap of records to a varied collection of phonodiscs, slides, kits, cassettes, filmloops, films, art prints, and realia. Circulation expanded with the collection, and with this expansion came a need for a full-time librarian. I was not willing to work full-time. Elsewhere in the library there was another librarian who wanted to maintain her part-time status and was interested in audiovisual services. The two of us began to share the work of the audiovisual department. I continued my usual Monday-Wednesday-Friday schedule; my partner filled in on Tuesday and Thursday. A year later my original partner departed and it was decided that two people could continue to share the work, but that the replacement would work three days a week. This was needed to keep up with the amount of work and to afford us an overlap day for better communication. We both have ten-month agreements and cover the slow summer months by alternating vacations. The department is staffed with a full-time nonprofessional circulation assistant and a part-time catalog typist, so we are able to concentrate on the creative aspects of materials selection, cataloging, reference, exhibits, and special projects.

Wednesday is the day we meet to discuss any problems that have arisen. We both are familiar with all aspects of the department, but concentrate on the areas in our specific job descriptions. I have the primary responsibility for selection and acquisition. I organize the work flow, administer the department, and have final responsibility for the department's services. My partner is primarily responsible for the organization of materials - classification, description, and subject headings. Considering that the collection is a closed one, that our students need considerable help in locating materials, and that LC cards are available for barely ten percent of our materials, the cataloging of media is most demanding of time and thought. We share the responsibility for reference service, liaison with the faculty, creation of exhibits, supervision of circulation, and technical processing.

The Advantages

What does work sharing mean to employers and to employees? Let's begin with the advantages to the employer. Opening a job on a shared basis immediately extends the range of applicants. There are many talented people who cannot, for all kinds of reasons, work a standard, full-time week. The reason may be the most common one of family responsibilities or the less common but equally valid one that the applicant has strong interests in other aspects of life, many of which are, incidentally, work-enhancing. This rationale is taken for granted in employment of teaching faculty who are assumed to need time for reading, research, study, and mental refreshment. How about librarians, those teachers in disguise? I wonder what performance level faculty would reach if they were expected to be on the job in the classroom 40 hours a week. How can librarians have the time and energy to extend their mental horizons after a full-time week?

Job sharing also signifies to the employer that he may have the benefit of a variety of talents that are often not available in one person. This is of special value to a library with a smaller staff. There are, of course, paragons

who are strong in every aspect of their jobs but, for example, one person may be a fine reference librarian but only a mediocre cataloger. An employer takes the good with the not-so-good when they are embodied in a single person. When two people share a job, the employer can expect more talents to meet the varied demands of the job and this condition is, obviously, more likely when two people share that job.

The employer should also consider the catalytic effect of job sharing. One plus one sometimes equals three. We find that our minds spark more often with the stimulation we offer each other. Staff papers, reports, exhibits, in fact, everything we do is better done in critical collaboration. The flaws or the potential of a suggestion made by one partner are more visible when examined by the other.

Another plus for the employer is that the store is always tended. In a one-person job, when that person leaves for another position, the employer can expect a substantial loss of efficiency occasioned by the months of training required for new personnel. In the shared job, if one leaves, there is still someone knowledgeable on the spot and able to train new staff with a minimum of shock. The same advantage applies in times of illness or vacation.

Most important to the employer are the freshness and enthusiasm and, yes, committment to the work that job sharers feel. Because job sharing is rare, job sharers have a strong appreciation of their jobs and of the willingness of employers to innovate in this way. Although as part-time employees we are not required to serve on college committees nor attend college functions such as commencements, we participate in these activities with the enthusiasm engendered by surplus time and energy. I am able to spend more hours of my own time than full-time people on various college projects. I have organized college craft shows, visited galleries and artists to help in the acquisition of art for the college collection, acted as film adviser to students, served on the cultural affairs committee, organized a consciousness-raising group for women students, and have spoken on Women's Liberation to classes at the invitation of faculty. How many working a full work week and with any sort of personal life, could do all this with enthusiasm and élan? Fatigued employees who do not have the time to refresh their minds and spirits cannot contribute as much to the employer.

What does work sharing mean to us, the sharers? It is not difficult to see that it means the best of all possible worlds. We both have husbands, children, houses, and many interests in which we wish to involve ourselves. We are both mature, educated women who need to satisfy our love of learning. We want to encourage students of all ages. We want to participate in the world and to share the financial burden of family support. We want to work: we also want to be unharried wives, mothers, and friends. Neither of us is a Superwoman who can work full time, tend to the needs of our families, and fulfill our own hunger for intellectual recreation. By sharing a job, we have the opportunity to do all these things. We can contribute our skills and ourselves without paying the price of fatigue, ignored families, and impossibly crowded days. Job sharing is a liberation. It should be considered as a mode not only for married women, but as a new way of living for both men and women. It offers exciting possibilities in the reconstruction of work and family life by suggesting a practical method whereby men can work and be equal sharers in family life; women can have families and also work at their careers.

I have spoken to many men and women on the subject of job sharing. Every one of them found it appealing. There will, of course, be individuals who want full-time jobs with full pay and benefits. Many, however, seem to prefer the possibility of job sharing which gives them the opportunity of paid work plus fuller participation in family and personal life. The traditional dilemma which faces men and women would be eliminated by this option.

Montgomery County Community College states in its catalog that it has been established "to educate each student to his highest potential so that he may fulfill himself and give of his individuality to society." In taking the first steps toward job sharing, perhaps the college is expanding its aims to include post-students. What is the point of educating a student to "his highest potential" if that potential can be used only in a rigid, full-time job system?

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