

Job Sharing in Australia: Possibilities, Problems and Strategies

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Abstract

This paper defines job sharing and explores its potential benefits. An overview of its origins and growth in Australia and overseas is followed by discussion of management issues. Organisational issues concern aspects of planning, implementation and operation. Issues for job sharers include finding an appropriate job share partner, maintenance of the job sharing relationship, protection of voluntary participation and preservation of pro rata benefits and other working conditions. A process for facilitating effective liaison between management, job sharers and trade unions is proposed. Job sharing is uncommon in Australia but may assist workers to balance work and family responsibilities or pursue interests outside work while avoiding many disadvantages of precarious work. For employers, it may facilitate retention of valued staff, reduce turnover, enhance recruiting or reduce staff costs. These propositions have not been rigorously tested, however, and avenues for future research are therefore explored.

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Introduction

Since the mid-1970s there has been a marked growth in 'non-standard' or 'irregular' forms of work organisation in Australia and other developed economies (Burgess and Campbell 1998; Quinlan 1998). This trend has been reflected principally in an expansion of various forms of precarious employment, such as casual, sub-contract, temporary and home-based work. It is frequently claimed by politicians and business representatives that such 'flexible' forms of employment are 'family friendly', offering workers freedom to accommodate more effectively the conflicting demands of working hours and domestic responsibilities. While the effects of precarious employment depend on the form it takes and the context in which it occurs, it is generally associated with significant disadvantages for workers (Quinlan 1998). Most precarious workers would prefer to work longer hours in permanent jobs but may be significantly disadvantaged in gaining access to more secure employment (Burgess and Campbell 1998; Quinlan 1998). They are likely to be caught in a cycle of low earnings, poor non-wage benefits, limited training, restricted career progression and intermittent unemployment (Brosnan 1996; Burgess and Campbell 1998). A large, and growing, body of evidence also indicates that precarious work has widespread negative effects on occupational health and safety (Bohle, Quinlan and Mayhew 2001; Quinlan, Mayhew and Bohle 2001). Women are more likely to be employed precariously and are therefore more extensively exposed to these negative effects (Quinlan 1998; Hall, Harley and Whitehouse 1998).

The growth of precarious employment has been accompanied by a marked expansion of women's participation in the paid workforce (Burgess and Campbell 1998). Many more women with dependent children have taken up paid employment, providing a strong impetus for working arrangements that are genuinely compatible with family responsibilities (Eagle, Miles and Icenogle 1997; Frone and Yardley 1996; O'Driscoll 1996). Due to the gender division of domestic and caring labour, effective work and family policies have the potential to break down significant barriers to women's advancement in paid employment (Whitehouse and Zetlin 1999). Research on conflict between work and family indicates that its effects are asymmetric, with work intruding upon family life more than family intrudes upon work (Eagle *et al.* 1997; Frone, Yardley and Markel 1997). This role conflict can take the form of overlapping time demands, incompatible role norms and expectations, and strain from emotional interference between one domain and the other (O'Driscoll 1996). Work overload and time commitments are major predictors of work and family conflict (Frone, *et*

al. 1997). Although the evidence is not completely consistent, work and family conflict has been found to have negative effects, directly or indirectly, on job satisfaction, organisational commitment, perceived quality of work and family life, and absenteeism (Frone and Yardley 1996; O'Driscoll 1996). Like precarious employment, conflict between work and non-work roles can also have substantial negative effects on psychological and physical health (Baruch, Biener and Barnett 1987; O'Driscoll 1996; Pisarski, Bohle and Callan 1998). There has been limited research on the contribution of organisational policies and practices to conflict levels but inflexibility in relation to working hours and holidays has been found to contribute (O'Driscoll 1996). More generally, control over work demands and commitments appears to be an important factor (Baruch *et al.* 1987; O'Driscoll 1996).

International policy responses aimed at reducing work-family conflict have included the International Labour Organisation's Convention Number 156 on 'Workers with Family Responsibilities' and the Year of the Family in 1994. In Australia, legislative changes have provided incentives for employers to introduce work and family policies, particularly through the introduction of the Commonwealth Sex Discrimination Act 1984, the Affirmative Action (Equal Employment Opportunity for Women) Act 1986 and its successor, the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act 1999. The Workplace Relations Act 1996 also prohibits discrimination on the basis of family responsibilities. However, despite these developments, recent Australian evidence indicates that only a very small proportion of enterprise agreements contains at least one non-statutory work and family provision (Whitehouse and Zetlin 1999). Similarly, while a majority of certified industrial agreements contain 'family-friendly' provisions, the majority are flexible hours provisions such as accrual of rostered days off which are not necessarily introduced to facilitate a balance between work and family responsibilities.

One form of flexible work organisation, job sharing, may offer genuine benefits to both workers and employers. It has the potential to serve at least two important goals: 1) to give employees a greater capacity to coordinate work, family and other commitments and reduce work/non-work conflict while retaining the benefits of secure employment; and 2) to provide employers with a form of flexible work organisation that has wider human resource management benefits. Frone and Yardley (1996) found that women and those experiencing higher levels of family to work conflict are most likely to consider job sharing important (Frone and Yardley 1996). Interestingly, they found no gender differences in relation to four of the five

other family-friendly policies they examined, including flexitime, compressed work weeks, work at home and reduced working hours.

Advocates of job sharing claim that employers can benefit from lower absenteeism, reduced labour costs and improved retention of valued staff, particularly women (Leighton 1991; Davis 1997). These claims are consistent with wider evidence that employees with access to other family-friendly policies display greater organisational commitment and lower intention to leave (Grover and Crooker 1995; Kandola 1995). Kandola (1995) describes a major bank in which provision of child-care led to a decrease in turnover. Training costs were also reduced. Interestingly, Grover and Crooker (1995) found that improvements in commitment and intention to leave applied whether or not employees stood to benefit personally from family-friendly policies. They attribute this phenomenon to the symbolic role of such policies in demonstrating broader employer concern for employee interests.

This paper reviews the limited evidence available on job sharing, focusing principally on experience in Australia. Job sharing is defined and differentiated from work sharing and other forms of part-time work. Its potential benefits are then discussed and its growth and prevalence are examined. After a discussion of management and implementation issues, a process for maximising the effectiveness of job sharing is proposed. Finally, avenues for future empirical research are explored.

Defining Job Sharing

Several definitions have been proposed for job sharing (see, for example, Wood and Wattus, 1987: 105; Work and Family Unit, 1997: 2). They generally have three common characteristics:

- a specification that a defined full-time job is shared by two or more workers
- a requirement that the arrangement is voluntary for both employers and employees
- a requirement that job share partners accrue the pay and conditions of the full-time job on a pro rata basis according to hours worked.

Most definitions specify two employees sharing one job but some writers discuss more workers sharing one or more jobs. Pro rata benefits include training and development, performance bonuses, leave and other entitlements. It has also been suggested that the length of the job sharing arrangement should be negotiated and agreed between the job share partners

and the employer before it is implemented. Ideally, a minimum period of operation should be specified with an opportunity for the job sharers to revert to full-time work.

The Commonwealth Government Work and Family Unit (1997: 2-3) divides job sharing into three categories: shared responsibility, divided responsibility and unrelated responsibility. In the shared responsibility category, job partners are jointly responsible for one full-time job with no division of duties, an arrangement that is well suited to jobs in which tasks carry over from day to day. In the divided responsibility category, the partners are allocated responsibility for specific facets of the job, generally by project, task or client group. Although the job share partners perform different tasks, they provide support for each other to ensure that all tasks associated with the job are covered on a full-time basis. Unrelated responsibility occurs when the job share partners work on completely separate tasks and their positions are merely combined into a full-time post for accounting purposes. Essentially, they are employed in separate part-time jobs with no shared responsibilities. Arguably, this arrangement should be viewed as another form of part-time work, rather than genuine job-sharing, and it will not be examined in this paper. In fact, we consider that the principal characteristic differentiating job sharing from part-time work more generally is the sharing of roles, responsibilities or tasks that would otherwise be allocated to a smaller number of full-time workers.

Job sharing is sometimes confused with work sharing. However, work sharing lacks the voluntary character of genuine job sharing. It is used specifically to create an alternative to retrenchments by spreading a reduced volume of work across an existing workforce (Blyton and Trinczek 1997). The working hours of most, if not all, affected employees are reduced. Work sharing is primarily a response to adverse financial or economic conditions and workers, particularly the most disadvantaged, are compelled to participate by a desire to retain jobs considered at risk. It is sometimes presented as a permanent solution to intractable unemployment, but this is a dubious proposition and work sharing is unlikely to gain support from workers and trade unions if alternatives exist (Wood and Wattus 1987; Blyton and Trinczek 1997). In general, work sharing and job sharing arise from different antecedent events. Whereas work sharing is prompted by financial stringency and possible insolvency, genuine job sharing is a more strategic, long-term means of enabling employees to establish a balance between work and other aspects of their lives. The benefits that may accrue from job sharing are likely to depend strongly on genuine voluntary participation and maintenance of pro rata wages and conditions. If either is lost, the value of

the arrangement may be diminished considerably, particularly for employees.

The potential of job sharing

Job sharers constitute a small, differentiated segment of the permanent part-time workforce. The most significant difference between job sharing and other forms of permanent part-time work is that other part-time positions exist independently without the need for a partner, whereas job sharers cooperate to support a position required by the organisation on an ongoing, full-time basis. Through job sharing, employees who are unable or unwilling to continue working full-time can maintain labour force participation, as well as benefits and conditions that would be lost if they transferred to casual or part-time work.

Unlike casual employment, which attracts few of the benefits of permanent, full-time work and can be terminated on very short notice, genuine job sharing should provide employees with employment security, access to training and skills development and other benefits of full-time work. Further, job sharing usually provides for regular working hours, in contrast to some other forms of flexible employment which impose irregular shifts and unpredictable hours that conflict directly with family responsibilities (Whitehouse and Zetlin 1999).

Employees may choose to job share for many reasons, some of which may not be related to family responsibilities (Wood and Wattus 1987; Hall 1993). These reasons include:

- child rearing
- caring for other family members
- dealing with extended periods of family crisis, such as those caused by death or illness
- bridging to retirement for older workers for whom it is difficult to secure or retain full-time employment
- providing a first experience of regular employment for young people, which may be combined with study or other part-time work
- providing a regular, if limited, income for people pursuing other unpaid or poorly-paid interests.

Working mothers with partners are more likely than women without partners to stay at home when their children are below 5 years old, to work part-time when their children are between the ages of 5 and 14, and then to increasingly work full-time (ABS Catalogues No. 4422.0 and 6224.0).

Mothers of children up to 14 years of age are almost nine times more likely to work part-time for family reasons (34 percent) than fathers (4 percent) (Work and Family 1997: 6; ABS Catalogues No. 4422.0 and 6224.0). For these women, the voluntary nature of job sharing, its pro rata benefits and relative security give it advantages over casual arrangements and more narrowly defined part-time positions. They are less likely to experience at least some of the disadvantages suffered by women in precarious employment, including limited control and discretion, low (pro rata) pay, lack of task diversity, and particularly dissatisfaction with the amount of work available to them (Hall *et al.* 1998).

Since job share partners cover positions on an ongoing basis, but individually work part-time, there may be less need for temporary personnel during vacations, periods of ill-health and long service leave (Wood and Wattus 1987). The position and the organisation can benefit from having multiple inputs and perspectives to determine the most appropriate, efficient and creative ways to perform tasks. Job sharing may improve an organisation's image in the eyes of current and prospective employees, and may be particularly important in the recruitment and retention of women employees (Marshall 1995). However, organisations can also use job sharing as a means of petty cost cutting, contravening the principle that job share partners should receive pro rata benefits and conditions. Since job sharing is voluntary, re-negotiation of benefits and conditions should only be expected to ensue if it is mutually acceptable, satisfying the needs of the organisation and the employee.

The growth of job sharing internationally

Research on job sharing has mainly taken the form of either individual case studies, which provide rich information but lack the breadth necessary for general conclusions to be drawn, or industry surveys that are broad but lack depth. The case studies have demonstrated that job sharing can be successful across a range of industries and occupational groups (see Christopher and Perry 1983; Hall 1993; Will 1995). Job sharing emerged in the United States during the 1970s, generally at the instigation of employees seeking more flexible working hours (Leighton 1991: 285; Bongiorno 1993). It was initially promoted on the basis that it offered women more opportunities to work and pursue careers while managing family commitments (Woods and Wattus 1987: 106). In the US, job sharing has been most prevalent and successful in the insurance industry. For example, Continental Corporation achieved a 15 percent increase in productivity 15 months after introducing

a series of family-friendly policies, including job sharing and telecommuting (Bongiorno 1993: 86). A package including job sharing and other flexible options at Massachusetts Mutual appears to have contributed to very low turnover and a high level of long-term commitment to the company (Engler 1996: 24-27). Nevertheless, the extent to which such improvements are specifically attributable to job sharing is open to debate.

In the United Kingdom, job sharing also appeared during the 1970s. It was initially promoted in conjunction with equal employment opportunity policies and backed by public sector trade unions. Although some trade unions have become advocates of job sharing, citing its potential to reduce unemployment, others have been sceptical about its benefits, fearing that employers might exploit job sharing to extend their control of the workplace (Leighton 1991).

In New Zealand, a case study in the university town of Dunedin provides an excellent example of extensive job sharing (Hall 1993). In this case, both public and private sector employers initiated job sharing, in contrast to the more common tendency for employees to promote such arrangements. Hall (1993: 65-68) argued that the decentralisation and deregulation of industrial relations in New Zealand explained the unexpectedly large number of organisations experimenting with job sharing. If this were correct, then it would have significant implications for job sharing in Australia, following the shift towards enterprise bargaining. It has been widely argued (for example, Business Council of Australia 1989) that if Australian employers provide flexible working options, organisational performance will improve through the development of a diverse, more flexible workforce. However, despite its thirty-year history, the available evidence suggests that job sharing continues to be regarded as experimental by most Australian organisations.

Job sharing in Australia

Several factors appear likely to create pressures for the expansion of job sharing in Australian workplaces. They include employee motivation to job share, health concerns arising from work intensification and work/non-work conflict, the broader pool of skills and experience provided by job share partners and other potential human resource management and financial benefits to organisations. These pressures are associated with a much broader expansion of part-time employment. Between August 1990 and August 1996, part-time employment in Australia increased from 20.8 percent to 26.7 percent of employees, considerably above the OECD

average (ABS Cat. No. 6224). It is not clear how many of these employees were job sharers. There has also been a dramatic increase in casual employment, rising from 17 per cent of the total workforce in 1988 to 27 per cent in 1998 (ABS Cat. No. 6202.0). Job sharing may offer opportunities for more creative, long-term approaches to employment strategies than merely increasing casualisation.

Specific information on the incidence and effectiveness of job sharing in Australia is very limited. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), for example, does not collect separate data on job sharing, simply including it within the larger category of part-time employment. However, relevant Australian data have become available from various sources, including the Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey (AWIRS) and the ADAM database compiled by the Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training (ACIRRT) (Callus *et al.* 1991; Morehead *et al.* 1997; ACIRRT 1997, 1998). Case studies have also highlighted evidence of the concentration of job sharing amongst female clerical workers, a group that is in a relatively weak bargaining position, particularly in a period when many clerical jobs are being eliminated, for example through contracting out (Lafferty and Roan 2000). The AWIRS data support these findings and give an indication of the extent of the concentration of part-time work amongst women. Additionally, they illustrate the degree to which professional and managerial posts are likely to be excluded from job share arrangements.

Neither the Australian Bureau of Statistics nor several insurance companies, contacted in 2000 for this paper, reported compiling statistics on job sharing. In cases where data have been collected, the available figures differ widely, presenting a major obstacle to accurate evaluation of the prevalence of job sharing. A survey by Drake Personnel indicated that 35 percent of a selective sample of employers offered job sharing (Drake Personnel 1997). This seems extremely optimistic; ACIRRT (1997) data relating to a similar time period indicated that just 2 percent of Enterprise Agreements registered in the Federal, New South Wales, Queensland and Australian Capital Territory jurisdictions included a job-share option. One third of these agreements was concentrated in the finance industry. However, even here the 28 agreements with job-sharing provisions represented only 9.4 percent of all enterprise agreements in the industry. We also conducted a further survey of 100 industrial awards and 100 enterprise agreements from industries other than finance, spanning the period 1996-2001. Only one industrial award and two enterprise agreements contained any reference to job sharing. Of these, only one (the Port Philip Enterprise Agreement Number 2,

1999-2001) had a clause that could be regarded as substantial. Evidence from Australian Workplace Agreements also indicates minimal presence of alternative working arrangements, including job sharing (Roan, Bramble and Lafferty 2001). This represents a low level of formal recognition of job sharing as a valid employment option.

While the lack of systematic research makes it difficult to estimate the prevalence of job sharing in Australia, it does appear to be considerably lower than in the United States. According to the Brisbane office of the Australian Insurance Council, many insurers prefer to use temporary staff to fill gaps. This ad hoc, short-term orientation is likely to limit the consideration given to the longer-term benefits of job sharing, such as retention of skilled staff and improved productivity. An approach to the Brisbane branch of the Finance Sector Union (FSU) regarding the extent of job sharing within the industry in Brisbane indicated that, although several insurance companies have job sharing provisions in their enterprise agreements, the union did not have specific data on its prevalence. In common with the ABS, the FSU simply includes job sharing within its permanent part-time category. However, advice from the union indicated that job sharing is rarely implemented.

Contrary to arguments that enterprise bargaining would provide greater flexibility and a broader range of innovative workplace arrangements, clauses promoting flexible and responsive working conditions are less common in enterprise agreements than they were in industrial awards (ADAM Report Number 6: 15). This contrasts with the New Zealand experience. In Australia, enterprise agreements tend to be considerably less comprehensive than industrial awards have been historically. Explicit references to family-friendly working time arrangements, such as job sharing, are absent from the vast majority of them (ADAM Report Number 2: 9). Concurrently, industrial awards have been reduced to minimal 'safety net' documents through limitation to twenty 'allowable matters' and issues that do not have an immediate impact on organisational outputs have become marginalised.

Employers and employees interested in job sharing may encounter several barriers to its implementation and successful operation. The following section identifies problems with job sharing arrangements and proposes strategies to avoid or minimise them.

Management issues and possible responses

The main problems with job sharing can be divided into those that are principally organisational in nature and those that more specifically concern the job sharers themselves. The organisational category may be further divided into problems of planning and initial implementation and problems arising during the subsequent operation of the job sharing arrangements. While organisational and individual problems are interrelated, the following classification should provide a framework for identifying and avoiding common pitfalls in the implementation and management of job sharing.

Organisational issues: Planning and implementation

Ad hoc arrangements

'Alternative' working arrangements (such as home-based work or job sharing) are often introduced on an ad hoc basis. The absence of coherent policies and procedures can lead to problems being encountered repeatedly. Detailed planning is essential to clarify and define how job sharing will operate within the organisation. Many problems can be dealt with prior to implementation, by enabling all interested parties to contribute to the development of a mutually agreed framework for the arrangement (Solomon 1994). A formal company policy on job sharing developed in this way can provide a frame of reference for initiation, operation and issue resolution, minimising the likelihood of later confrontation and conflict. However, genuine management commitment and a conducive organisational climate are necessary to ensure job sharing is promoted and implemented. Without such support, family-friendly policies may fail to deliver organisational benefits or even have negative effects (Grover and Crooker 1995).

Concentration on lower organisational levels

There is a widespread perception that job sharing is only appropriate at lower organisational levels. This perception is largely based on an assumption that job sharing cannot provide sufficient coherence and continuity of work and decision-making at more senior levels. However, the case study described by Leighton (1991) illustrates that job sharing has worked effectively at more senior and complex levels. Also, interviews conducted by the present authors revealed successful job-sharing arrangements at senior management level at Australian Mutual Permanent (AMP).

High visibility of job sharers in the work unit

Especially when job sharing is new, the arrangement and the job sharers are likely to be very conspicuous, placing additional stress on the both the arrangement and the employees involved (Leighton 1991: 295; Work and Family Unit 1997). Training and open discussion about the rationale for job sharing, especially its potential benefits, with all affected clients and staff members can reduce this problem from the outset.

Organisational issues: Continuing operation

Coordination

After commencement of a job sharing arrangement, there may be difficulties in ensuring continuity, consistency and commitment in areas such as meeting attendance, work assignment and recreation leave arrangements. Job sharing requires experimentation, self-evaluation and self-confidence to enable partners to identify their respective areas of competence (Christopher and Perry 1983: 12; Leighton 1991: 283-295). This process should be complemented by careful selection of job sharers with compatible skills and attitudes, and by appropriate ongoing training and support for the partners, their managers and colleagues.

Withdrawal of a job share partner

One job share partner may resign or return to full-time work. The withdrawal of a partner should be addressed in the organisation's formal job sharing policy, the enterprise agreement or the job sharers' contracts to ensure that all parties understand their rights and responsibilities from the outset. Partner replacement, while probably the best option, may be difficult in practice. Alternatively, redeployment to another job share arrangement of commensurate status and remuneration may also be possible (Work and Family Unit 1997: 22).

Insufficient feedback

Feedback on performance for job share partners, both individually and for the combined position, can be problematic. Lack of feedback may reflect managers' unsubstantiated assumptions about reduced work and career commitment among job sharers (Leighton 1991: 294; Work and Family Unit 1997: 30-31). Feedback to job sharers should be provided on the same formal and informal bases as to full-time staff. Particularly with new job share arrangements, a system of regular formal and informal review can be

helpful, and should involve job sharers, managers and other team members (Work and Family Unit 1997: 39). Clients, managers and trade union representatives may provide valuable feedback and assistance in ensuring that the job share arrangements achieve acceptance and operate efficiently.

Issues for job share partners

Finding a suitable partner

Finding an appropriate person with whom to job share is often difficult for employees (Hutt 1992), and is best achieved through the organisation maintaining a central register of employees interested in entering a job share arrangement. For example, AMP maintains a workplace diversity register, which provides a useful means of matching potential job share partners (enterprise agreement, 1997: 19-20).

Job sharers with different skills and aspirations

Disparities in skills, qualifications or expectations may make career advancement more likely for one partner than the other (Leighton 1991: 292) and cause problems with job roles and descriptions, remuneration and the willingness of one partner to remain in the job sharing position. These problems are most likely to arise under an 'unrelated duties' job share arrangement. In most cases, employees with significantly different skill levels should not job share, but rather occupy two separate part-time positions.

Tensions between job-share partners

Conflict can emerge between job share partners as a result of ineffective communication or perceived inequities in workload or effort (Leighton 1991: 294-295). These issues are best addressed at the job design stage so that the partners and the relevant managers are aware of their mutual obligations and the need for effective communication. For example, a review of several insurance industry enterprise agreements revealed that they require job share partners to ensure that important information is communicated at hand-overs. This can be achieved in a variety of ways, such as allowing for an overlap of working time between the job sharers and use of e-mail, voicemail, 'to do' lists and file notes.

Training and development opportunities

Some job sharers are reluctant to request training and staff development, or volunteer for it, feeling that their working hours are already limited and training will result in further lost work time (Work and Family Unit 1997: 28). As a consequence, job sharers may be disadvantaged in comparison to full-time staff. They may be unable to develop new skills, becoming relatively deskilled. Training and development programs should be made equally available to job sharers and directly publicised to them.

Financial considerations

Clearly, job sharers must be able to afford to live on reduced pay. In relation to this issue, ABS data indicate that only a quarter of part-time and casual employees would prefer to work full-time (ABS Catalogue Number 6224.0). Although the majority of part-time and casual workers may not aspire (at least in the short term) to full-time employment, it is advisable to encourage all prospective job sharers to examine their budgets, and assess whether part-time employment is genuinely financially viable, prior to the commencement of the arrangement.

Undermining of voluntary participation

Pressure toward involuntary participation is most likely to occur when an employer makes continuing employment contingent upon taking up a job sharing position. In general, individual employees will be poorly placed to negotiate and maintain equitable conditions and benefits and may, in such circumstances, work longer than the hours formally agreed in an effort to increase employment security. For this reason, effective trade union involvement is valuable from the employee's point of view, providing assistance to ensure that job sharing is strictly voluntary and working conditions are maintained. Unions can also play a key role in monitoring and reviewing working conditions for job sharers.

Implementation strategies

The discussion above suggests that effective liaison between management, staff and trade unions should be established from the outset to ensure that job sharing arrangements optimally satisfy the needs of the job share partners, other affected employees and the employer. A clear, coherent process for managing the implementation and operation of job sharing arrangements should reduce the incidence of the problems outlined above.

Drawing on the points made above, the following six steps are proposed as a broad framework for managing the introduction of job sharing:

1. *Define a formal job sharing policy with effective input from management, employees and unions.* This policy should help to eliminate the problem of ad hoc job sharing arrangements, through the integration of job sharing with organisational goals and employee needs.
2. *Communicate and explain the job sharing policy extensively within the organisation and seek feedback.* Initial concerns about job sharing can be addressed through identification and discussion of associated expectations and responsibilities. Stressing the voluntary nature of job sharing can reinforce its status as an alternative, rather than aberrant, form of work arrangement.
3. *Establish mechanisms for applications, position listing and approval of job sharing arrangements and create a register of potential job sharers.* Such initiatives should facilitate the processes of finding job share partners, matching partners with compatible skills and aspirations, and locating replacement job partners.
4. *Provide appropriate training to job sharers, co-workers and managers prior to, and during, implementation.* In conjunction with previous steps, this should provide the basis for the coordinated introduction and management of job sharing. It should highlight methods for dealing with problems such as the high visibility of job sharers in work units and ensure that job sharers do not become deskilled through lack of appropriate training and staff development.
5. *Collect ongoing feedback and monitor effectiveness on an individual and organisational basis.* This step should alleviate problems attributable to insufficient feedback and ensure that difficulties in job sharing arrangements are identified and resolved as early as possible.
6. *Perform a regular formal review of job sharing policies and practices.* This should evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness of job sharing as a long-term working arrangement, for both employers and employees, within the specific organisational context.

Directions for research

At present, due to a paucity of rigorous research, it is unadvisable to draw firm conclusions about the prevalence, impact or management of job sharing. Nevertheless, the available evidence does suggest that job sharing offers potential benefits and consequently it warrants further research.

Certainly, more systematic and sophisticated investigation is required before its effects are firmly established and the issues surrounding its introduction and management are well understood.

The shortage of compelling research reflects, at least in part, real barriers to investigation of job sharing in Australia. Most sources of population-level data have yet to separate job sharing from other forms of part-time work and consequently it is not completely clear where it is concentrated, in terms of industries, occupations or organisational levels. Sampling and other methodological problems have also hampered research focused on organisations, worksites or individual job sharers. Few organisations appear to have formal job sharing policies and even fewer seem to have implemented or promoted them. Even if job sharing is formalised and supported, the number of employees in a single organisation actually participating will generally be low. It is therefore difficult to organise access to samples large enough to support sophisticated statistical analysis of surveys or to promote confidence in the validity of findings. This constraint is perhaps one reason why small-sample case study methodology is so common. Unfortunately, the research designs employed in most studies to date have not been sophisticated enough to convincingly demonstrate the effects of job sharing and differentiate them from those of alternative forms of 'non-standard' employment, such as permanent part-time work.

Several steps could be taken to improve research methodology and strengthen understanding of job sharing in Australia. In population-level research, specific data on job sharing should be more widely collected to facilitate comparisons with other categories of non-standard work. For example, it would be valuable if the Australian Bureau of Statistics separated job sharing from other forms of part-time work in future work surveys. Greater differentiation of non-standard employment categories is justified on the grounds that available evidence suggests they vary in their impact on work conditions and other outcomes for workers (Burgess and De Ruyter 2000; Hall *et al.* 1998). For example, a recent review of international evidence indicates that temporary work has much more consistently negative effects on occupational health and safety than part-time work (Quinlan *et al.* 2001). Reliable data on the prevalence and distribution of job sharing would also greatly assist researchers attempting to generate larger samples in studies conducted at the organisational, worksite or individual level.

Research focusing on organisations or individual job sharers could be strengthened in several ways. Empirical work to date has been almost exclusively cross-sectional, with simple case studies constituting the dominant methodology. A greater diversity of methods, and more rigorous

research designs, would generate more compelling evidence concerning both the effects of job sharing and the management issues that surround it. More structured qualitative research could make an important contribution. For example, structured exploratory interview methods, such as convergent interviewing (Dick 1990), would provide an excellent means of developing understanding of issues from the points of view of job sharers and managers. Overall, more intense qualitative research would prove particularly valuable for developing understanding of participants' motives for taking up job sharing, the organisational processes surrounding its implementation and the benefits and disadvantages as they are perceived by workers and managers.

Such research would also ensure that subsequent quantitative research was effectively grounded in the experience of those involved in job sharing programs as well as the more abstract and theoretical concerns of researchers. Questionnaire surveys, with sufficiently large and well-targeted samples, could be used to more clearly demonstrate the relationships between key variables. For example, the many potential associations between variables such as organisational level, age, gender, domestic responsibilities, career progression during and after the job share, training opportunities, management strategies, family impacts and other non-work benefits or disadvantages of job sharing have yet to be thoroughly evaluated. Common method variance may be a problem with cross-sectional surveys based entirely on self-report data (Grover and Crooker 1995). Consequently, more factual measures, such as turnover or career progression data from organisational records, should also be included when available. In any case, if surveys and other quantitative methodologies are to be implemented effectively, it will be necessary to carefully define and operationalise all variables under investigation. Again, well-designed qualitative research could assist significantly in this process. However, if possible, established and validated measures of relevant attitudinal, health, domestic and organisational variables should also be employed. Measures of more specific correlates or outcomes of job sharing may nevertheless have to be developed and validated.

Once critical variables have been satisfactorily operationalised, quasi-experimentation may provide a valuable means of demonstrating cause and effect relationships (see Cook and Campbell 1979). Longitudinal studies with measures taken before, during and after the completion of job sharing will provide the best test of the effects of job sharing on both individuals and organisations (Frone and Yardley 1996). Collection of data from suitable control groups will assist to differentiate the effects of job sharing

from those of permanent part-time work or less secure forms of 'flexible' employment, such as temporary or casual work. Complex statistical techniques, such as structural equation modelling, may be required to describe the interrelationships between key variables. Ultimately, however, it is most likely that a range of studies employing different methodologies will provide the most convincing and robust body of evidence.

Conclusions

Within the limitations of existing knowledge, job sharing appears to offer organisations one means to respond constructively to pressures for more family-friendly work practices. It may facilitate a more effective balance between work and other commitments for employees while also delivering benefits for employers. In comparison with many other alternatives to full-time employment, genuine job sharing offers the promise of two significant benefits for employees. The first is that it should be voluntary and initiated by the employee. The second is that it should provide a level of security equal to that of a full-time position with the same conditions of employment, including pro rata benefits. More broadly, it may enable employees who have often made substantial investments in careers and skills development to maintain a viable position within the workplace, from which they can resume full-time employment when other commitments allow.

While it is true that permanent part-time work may offer similar conditions, job sharing may be acceptable to employers when individual part-time jobs may not, such as when cooperation and coordination are required across the full working week. Conversely, job sharing may present a greater challenge for managers and employees than other forms of part-time work by demanding successful management of a relationship with a job share partner (or partners). In fact, despite encouraging evidence, there are still many open empirical questions regarding the advantages and disadvantages of job sharing in comparison to other reasonably secure forms of non-standard work, such as permanent part-time, or even more precarious employment, such as casual or temporary work.

Employees may seek to job share for a variety of reasons. The most frequently discussed, and probably the most common, is to meet domestic commitments, principally child rearing or caring for other dependants. However, other economic and lifestyle considerations may lie behind an employee's wish to job share, such as securing an adequate income while pursuing study or poorly remunerated creative work. The conditions that

make job sharing attractive to workers may change for life-cycle reasons. For older workers who are unable to find full-time employment, job sharing may simply be a more desirable option than long periods of casual work or unemployment. Many workers with young children may well wish to return to full-time employment within the same organisation when the children begin school. In these circumstances, job sharing may provide a relatively brief, but important, hiatus in a full-time career for the worker that allows the organisation to retain valuable experience. It may be one of several options, including 'standard' part-time work or home-based work and, again, more empirical evidence is required to demonstrate its benefits and disadvantages for these different groups of workers.

The available evidence, especially from overseas, suggests that job sharing can also deliver benefits to organisations. North American research indicates that it is most prevalent in the insurance and financial sectors, but is not restricted to these industries. Other evidence suggests job sharing need not be confined to the lowest levels of organisations and can be implemented successfully for professionals and senior managers. Employers who facilitate job sharing may achieve a variety of benefits. The most tangible are likely to be cost reductions, such as lower labour turnover and the capacity to cover for illness or other absences without hiring temporary staff. Several less tangible benefits may also emerge, including improved morale and an enhanced ability to recruit and retain skilled employees, even those who may never exercise the job sharing option. Real costs of job sharing (for example, increased payroll costs and other on-costs) must be balanced against these potential benefits.

Despite its potential benefits, job sharing is uncommon in Australia. Its neglect in awards and agreements has important ramifications in the context of changes to legislative provisions under the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act 1999. The Act, which replaced the Affirmative Action (Equal Employment Opportunity for Women) Act 1986, has reduced regulatory and reporting requirements on organisations, in the name of providing greater flexibility for employers. Consequently, there is an increased need for awards and agreements to achieve tangible equity outcomes. A potentially important avenue for the achievement of work and family goals is presently overlooked as bargaining tends to focus on 'bottom line' issues such as pay and employee numbers.

The neglect of job sharing has occurred despite unions and some employer associations, most notably the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI), lending public support to it (see ACCI 2000). Employers' resistance may reflect a disposition to focus on immediate costs

over longer-term benefits or simply a desire to avoid perceived management problems associated with the introduction of job sharing. As with other significant changes in work organisation, clear and appropriate policies in conjunction with well-grounded implementation processes are essential to deal with such issues. This paper has highlighted problems that may often arise and proposed strategies to deal with them. Awareness of potential problems, and knowledge of appropriate processes to resolve them, should make successful implementation more likely. However, considerably more rigorous research is required before the impact and management of job sharing is thoroughly understood.

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