

# 'Co-CEOs' – setting the tone from the top on flexible work arrangements

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## Key Points

- There can be real benefits to individuals, the organisations they work for, and broader society to adopt a 'top-sharing' arrangement (when a job-share is done for an executive role) that enables a dual leadership mindset.
- Top-sharing brings flexibility, opportunity and strengthened decision-making. The arrangement demonstrates commitment to a productive, mentally healthy workplace, and contributes to a collaborative and constructive culture.
- The Victorian Environmental Water Holder has appointed Co-CEOs to offer flexibility, retain talent and provide strong and consistent leadership so that their staff and organisation can thrive.
- Job-sharing can be successfully done in senior roles and is a solution to work-life balance for Executives.

## Abstract

In order to be successful, organisations need to become more innovative and flexible in job design. Job sharing enables employees to thrive and succeed, and can be done for all roles, including executive positions. This approach is referred to as a 'top-sharing' arrangement, and the Victorian Environmental Water Holder (VEWH) has used it to appoint Co-CEOs, a move that has provided flexibility, retained talent and enabled strong and consistent leadership. This has meant that the staff and organisation can thrive, as the 'dual leadership' mindset has resulted in many benefits including strengthened decision-making by setting the tone from the top on flexible work arrangements. The arrangement demonstrates commitment to a mentally healthy workplace and contributes to a collaborative and constructive culture. The Co-CEO arrangement at the VEWH provides a good role model for the public service, the waterway health industry and beyond. It demonstrates that job-sharing at an executive level can work, and that there are clear benefits for individuals, organisations and broader society.

## Keywords

Flexible work, leadership, innovation, well-being, job-sharing, culture.

## Introduction

In these challenging times, it is as important as ever for organisations to create working arrangements that enable the recruitment and retention of talent, and that enable both men and women to thrive and succeed. Job-sharing is an uncommon and under-utilised way of working, despite the obvious benefits it brings. With working hours and work-related stress on the increase, the need to consider the design and shape of work is paramount. One of the COVID-19 global pandemic's silver linings is a forced rethinking of how organisations can create a more human-centric workforce to stave off burnout and retain talent. Job-sharing provides a unique opportunity to think about the design of roles and how to create effective ways of working.

Job-sharing is an advanced flexible working hours method that brings advantages for both employer and employee (Gholipour *et al.*, 2010). The motivation for job-sharing originated from equal employment opportunity considerations that were primarily focused on women who might find it more convenient to work less than full-time at particular points in their lives, such as for example, when they are also caring for

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young children (Harris, 1997). While job-sharing is more often done by women, it is a way for any gender to continue in employment whilst still spending time with young children or pursuing other hobbies and interests. Another motive for job-sharing may occur for employees approaching retirement; as they might want to begin getting involved in retirement pursuits whilst maintaining some employment.

Creating job-share opportunities at all levels is the next frontier in flexible work. All roles can be shared, some just need re-designing. When a job-share is done for an executive role, it can be called a 'top-share' (Andresen *et al.*, 2019). Two minds in one senior role is a game-changer as job-sharers can split the hours, workload and travel required of demanding senior positions. A key benefit is that by allowing job-sharing, organisations can attract and retain women caregivers so that they can work and care for family – maximising their talent, experience, and career aspirations without compromising other aspects of their lives.

### ***Job-share design***

There is no one-size-fits-all formula when designing a job-share in a senior role. The design will depend on the nature of the role and the level of expertise and capability required and/or available in the team. Daniel (2011) states that typically job shares are designed in three ways:

1. A 'pure' job-share arrangement where one job happens to be done by two or more people with the same level of capability and expertise and sharing a single set of performance measures.
2. A 'job-split' where the role is divided, for example by seniority, capability, client, project or geography, and with different but related performance measures.
3. A 'hybrid' job-share where there is a single set of accountabilities, but there is some shared and some divided responsibility. In all instances, each job share partner is sufficiently well informed to be able to pick up responsibilities and actions when the other is absent. Findings indicate that 'hybrid' job shares are more common in senior executive roles, where job sharers are more likely to specialise on the basis of their key strengths and expertise.

The hybrid model has been adopted by the Victorian Environmental Water Holder (VEWH), who appointed Co-CEOs (Dr Sarina Loo and Beth Ashworth) in 2019. Both CEOs work three days a week, which enables a day of handover. In 2021, Beth has taken maternity leave. Paulo Lay (on secondment from the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning) has taken up the Co-CEO role for 13 months. Paulo works nearly full-time and is in the Co-CEO role three days a week, with the rest of his time focusing on strategic projects. This example shows that you do not have to be part-time to job-share.

### ***Mentally healthy workplaces***

At the VEWH there is a strong focus on workplace safety and well-being, with job-sharing viewed as a great way to help people meet the many demands of life, both within and outside of work. The benefits flow across the whole organization, with a reinforced a culture of support and psychological safety. For the rest of the staff, it makes it easier to take up flexible work arrangements (such as modified hours, job-sharing and working part-time), as the Co-CEOs role model flexible work arrangements.

The VEWH wants the public service and waterway health industry to be stronger, through innovation and by demonstrating that co-leadership can be advantageous. There are clear benefits to the individual, the organisation and broader society. This paper talks through some of these benefits through the experience and lessons learnt by the VEWH.

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### **Benefits to the individual**

Job-sharing is not just for women returning from parental leave. A lot of people want to work flexibly to fit in with modern life. Care giving responsibilities are just one reason to job share. There are many motivations to want to work part-time or to learn from the experience of being in a job-share.

#### *Personal well-being*

The well-being benefits of job-sharing are clear. Job-sharing allows the flexibility to meet personal commitments whilst also having a satisfying career. People choose to job-share for many different reasons. Research by Daniel (2011) identified that the most common drivers for job sharing included family changes (births, marriages, ageing parents), organisational restructuring, reduced working hours before retiring, and accommodating other dimensions of life. While 87% of the survey respondents were women, 13% were men.

The Co-CEOs of the VEWH have noticed that with a top-share, there is the ability to mentally switch off on non-work days, knowing that someone else is at the helm. This leads to a proper recharge on days off, and the ability to return to work fresh and energized. Importantly, it enables more time to be spent with family than is possible in full-time employment.

#### *Ability to take on senior roles part-time*

Job-sharing provides opportunities for career progression that might not be available in a strictly part-time role. Job-sharers can take on more senior roles or bigger projects whilst still maintaining a better work-life balance than part-time roles. It enables ongoing career advancement at a time when women, in particular, can have significant parental responsibilities that might otherwise limit their ability to take on executive level roles.

#### *Peer support and increased learning*

It is often said that leadership is lonely. This is not the case in a top-share! Having a peer to use as a sounding board is both personally comforting and good for business decision-making. Personal development is also enhanced by job-sharing with a person with different strengths and experience.

Gholipour et al. (2010) identified increased learning as an advantage of job-sharing. A high percentage of the job-share people interviewed for their research expressed that they have been able to perform their jobs better because of the opportunity to learn from their partner. Successful co-leadership needs commitment, collaboration and honest conversations, these skills are honed through the top-sharing arrangement.

#### *Learning to put your ego aside*

One of the most important lessons from a top-share experience is to put ego aside and focus on the outcomes. One partner may start a task and have the other person finish it. Importantly, when failures happen, top-share partners need to address them together, regardless of personal input into the situation. Trust, respect and open communication are critical for an effective top-share partnership.

### **Benefits to the organisation**

Employers may be concerned that job-sharing will result in extra administration, doubling up of work and messages and confusion about dual reporting. Yet any marginal increases in administration are outweighed by the benefits, as the VEWH has seen productivity increase and skills retained. Job sharing is a way to keep employees who want to work part-time in the job they are qualified for and that they love.

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### ***Setting the tone from the top***

With an increase in flexible work arrangements, job sharing is starting to become more common. It is often performed for project work, and not generally done at managerial or executive levels. However, there can be real benefits to both individuals and the organisations they work for to adopt top-sharing and embrace a dual leadership mindset. By having top-share, flexible work arrangements are role modelled from the top. This makes staff more comfortable to approach their manager to ask for flexible work arrangements.

### ***Collaborative team culture***

A top-share can result in a collaborative executive team culture. The VEWH Co-CEOs talk through ideas in front of the senior managers, which leads to open debate and discussion, rather than a 'captain's call' culture. As a result, the executive team has become less hierarchical and more of a collective group.

### ***Collective problem-solving yields results***

It is well known that collective problem solving and decision-making is stronger than when it is done by an individual. By having dual leadership, the top-share arrangement means that the high-level, strategic approaches have the benefit of two minds working on them. At the VEWH, the Co-CEOs deliberately and regularly set aside time together to work through strategic matters, hence, the rigor of decision-making is improved, as both CEOs contribute perspectives based on individual skills and experience. They are bouncing ideas off each other all the time, and importantly, learning from each other.

### ***Increased productivity with built-in continuity***

A top-share can also lead to productivity increases. Each Executive is very focused and energised during their limited time, and conscious of not leaving things undone for their counterpart. They hold each other to account, help to drive each other's performance, and are conscious of representing each other. Additionally, when one person in the executive partnership is on annual leave or on a training course, the other is still providing continuity and guidance to the team. From a governance perspective top-sharing actually mitigates risk. Concepts are discussed in depth, and by the time a proposal is taken to the Board, greater due diligence has been done.

As job-sharing employees have a lot of control over their working time, their motivation and engagement are also greatly increased. Job sharing also fosters transparency, collaboration and knowledge sharing, all indispensable elements for the success of organisations (Uhereczky, 2019).

### ***Improved diversity and inclusion***

Job-sharing is a significant enabler of increasing diversity and inclusion of its workforce, particularly in relation to women, who still bear the majority of child caregiving in most households. The use of job-sharing can attract talented but under-represented candidates, currently unable to find part-time leadership roles (Public Service Commission and Gemini3, 2019).

## **Benefits to society**

Bailyn (2006) argues that society's separation of work and family is no longer a tenable model for employees or the organisations that employ them. Unless organisations are willing to radically rethink some of the basic assumptions about work, career paths, and time, both employee and employer will suffer in today's intensely competitive work environments. We need to rethink the connections between organisational processes and personal concerns.

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Many part-time workers are female and they get stuck at the lower to mid-point in their career. They are penalised in terms of income, career progression and superannuation. Many men, who wish to reduce their working hours for a specific period, shy away from requesting part-time, due to its reputation of being career-limiting and mainly for women undertaking administrative and support tasks. Many part-timers report that they have to squeeze in a full-time job into half the hours, as there isn't any thought put in how to accommodate the request for reduced working time for the specific role (Uhereczky, 2019). In this way, job-sharing is undermined by a culture of full-time work (Branine 2004). As has been demonstrated, however, job sharing can be used as part of an equal opportunities policy in order to attract and retain experienced and professional employees.

### ***Reducing the female brain drain***

Despite concerted efforts, businesses are still losing high performing female talent at an alarming rate. This was highlighted in the Davies report into (the lack of) Women on Boards (Davies, 2011). Davies suggests that the high level of female attrition is due in part to the lack of flexible working arrangements. The ability to offer a reduced hours working week, is a critical factor for the retention and progression of women into senior roles. Daniel (2011) shows that 80% of highly qualified women wish to work part-time, and that working three days is the preferred option. Many women perceive, however, that by opting to work part-time, they are hampering their career prospects. The top-share arrangement at the VEWH, has enabled Sarina and Beth to undertake a CEO role, whilst also caring for their young children.

Recruitment, retention and advancement of women is a business and societal imperative. Now is the right time for job-sharing to become mainstream as a form of flexibility that is arguably best fitted to opening up senior roles to women. A change in societies systems, which have been based on men as the only active members, to provide the required conditions to facilitates women's active presence in society are essential (Gholipour *et al.*, 2010).

### ***Contributing to communities***

Job-sharing enables employees to manage a work-life balance. This includes things like contributing to the community through volunteer work, maintaining health and wellbeing, parenting or caring for others. By spending less time at work, more time is freed up for broader societal involvement.

### ***Stress and anxiety reduction***

Job-sharing can offer important benefits to society, particularly less overall stress and reduced unemployment levels (Harris, 1997). Having time to exercise more, spend time with friends and family, connecting to nature, undertaking hobbies is extremely beneficial to health and well-being that may have flow on effects to less pressure on the health care system.

## **Conclusions**

In summary, job-sharing leads to productive, efficient and mentally healthy workplaces, and is a solution to work life balance for Executives. By adopting top-sharing, organisations can set the tone from the top on flexible work arrangements. Forward thinking organisations will embrace the opportunities that this way of working can offer.

The Co-CEO arrangement at the VEWH provides a good role model for the public service, the waterway health industry and beyond. It demonstrates that job-sharing at an executive level can work, and that there are clear benefits for individuals, organisations and broader society.

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