

Job share model: Classic 'twin'

Case Study



"One of us will handle an issue at one meeting, and the other progress it at the next. People are amazed at our consistency, and say things like 'but how did you know, you weren't even there'. That is the importance of a good handover."

Gabi Carrigan and Caroline Reed are Executive Directors, NDIS Reform at the Department of Premier and Cabinet. They have job shared using a 'twin model' for over three years, and while the model has stayed the same over the years, their approach to job sharing itself has consistently evolved to meet the needs of their work, their team, and the outcomes they need to achieve.

How they got started

Caroline was already at Premier and Cabinet (DPC), working as a Director in the Premier's Implementation Unit (PIU). While she had job shared before, her part-time role at PIU was growing and her manager, Glenn King, supported her exploring job share as a solution.

Using her networks, Caroline found Gabi, then working at Family and Community Services. They found they were at a

similar point in their careers – happy in their current roles, but wanting access to a broader range of part-time opportunities while caring for their young families.

Key to getting started was having a 'warts and all' conversation with each other about what motivated them, how they approached work, what they could expect from each other, and their career objectives, ambitions and plans. They also sounded out a trusted third party who knew them both to explore what would work well, and what could be a challenge. Gabi came over to DPC as a secondment initially, although confident they had the building blocks in place to make it work. Caroline's DPC experience provided invaluable background to the lay of the land that brought Gabi up to speed quickly, but both were aware that to work together effectively, they had to start thinking and working as a pair.

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This arrangement worked successfully for 18 months. Key to this was a supportive leader who was relaxed about how it would work, trusting Caroline and Gabi to get the working model right and to address issues as they arose. They put their success down to having similar, but complementary professional experience, being at similar points in their career, having a similar approach to leadership and investing in the partnership.

Seeking, and finding the next career step

When ready for their next career step they planned it thoroughly, considering how they would pitch it as a Band 2 executive job share. They used their networks to research the type of roles that might become available and understand what sort of role they wanted. Being part of a job share was a definite advantage in this respect, as it doubled the size of their networks, and increased the chances of building rapport with a potential future colleague or boss.

They prepared a single cover letter and ensured their CVs aligned. Aware that a CV, however, only gets you in the door, they were prepared for the questions they would get asked; for example, what if one person leaves, what if they come first and third in a process that needed (at that time) for them to come first and second. They gave a lot of thought to being fair; fair to the process, to each other, and to respecting each other's choices.

They unexpectedly learned that the most complex aspect of recruitment is not the application or interview process, but the decisions that came next. One opportunity, even with similar capabilities and backgrounds, may be more attractive to one person than other, depending on their prior experience. Because recruitment decisions need to be made quickly, it became clear it they needed to think ahead about these decisions together.

It also revealed that while researching the opportunities available is easier for a pair, the recruitment process itself can put more pressure on both, because the responsibility to succeed through the process and not let the other person down is more keenly felt. Both valued their working partnership enormously, and wanted to keep it going.

While they mostly interviewed separately, they felt the best experience was the recruiter that interviewed them together. It gave them the opportunity to demonstrate how the whole could be greater than the sum of its parts; something conventional approaches do not easily facilitate. What surprised them was how regularly they were asked how long they intended to job share and when they would go 'back' to full-time, as if it were an temporary measure rather than an intentional choice.



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Adapting to an environment that is still adapting itself

After successfully winning their current Band 2 role, Gabi and Caroline have invested further in making their job-share work, given its high stakeholder engagement (including Ministers and the Commonwealth) and sensitive policy development requirements.

Advised it would be hard to share Commonwealth relationships and negotiations successfully (and with few job sharers in this space as role models), they focused particularly on these areas and found ways to make all aspects of the role work as a pair.

They find job sharing as Band 2 Executives quite different to job-sharing at Band 1, and have evolved their handover, as well as how they spend their time on Wednesdays together. They also share a development coach, providing a regular

discipline of reflecting on their work and how they approach it.

However, one drawback of current approaches to job share has been the additional effort to coordinate their professional development with the organisation, as development opportunities are generally planned on the assumption they are for one person per role. All applications for programs currently must be done individually, as are the programs themselves – yet the knowledge and experience gained must be put into practice in a shared role.

While they previously took annual leave separately, they have now elected to try and do it at the same time. This is because there are currently no job sharers in their team, and they feel it is better to offer a full acting above grade opportunity to someone in their team, rather than ask them to learn a role and work in a multi-person job share.



"It's like the ultimate coaching experience, because you're continually learning from your partner and how they approach it."

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Caroline and Gabi's top tips for making it work

- You need to be a team person and approach every single aspect of your role as a pair. "When one of us says 'we think', it still catches people by surprise".
- Value the success of the pair more than the individual. This can be harder than it looks, for example, when one does the work and the other delivers the end product or outcome, but is essential.
- Need a shared understanding of what 'good' and 'good enough' looks like, so you can work to the same standard, and judge your team's work consistently. Similarly, you need a consistent sense of what is a priority and a similar approach to engaging with stakeholders.
- Need a similar work ethic, and commitment to your role.
- Never reopen or re-litigate decisions – the decision of one is the decision of both.
- Need to communicate well with each other and invest in that open and honest communication constantly.
- Be transparent, and own up to any mistakes you've made, or when something did not go well.
- Need a good, practical handover that can adapt to the prevailing context. There is no set and forget with your handover style – as your role changes, so will the handover requirements. Their current handover is more directional, and less transactional, as their current role requires. Some managers and teams of job sharers require more or less consistency: you need to dial it up and down as the situation and even meeting demands. They meet on Wednesdays, and have a Sunday night chat, as things move so quickly that writing it all down is impractical.
- Be careful about pinch points and potential tensions if managing other flexible workers such as part-timers, where one partner rarely gets to work with them. Consistency is key in this situation.
- Seek regular feedback from your team, manager and key stakeholders as to how it is working.
- Invest in peer relationships, which can fall by the wayside in a job share; ensure enough is time spent on fostering informal and formal relationships.

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The benefits of job sharing as an executive

Executive roles can be challenging, with an expectation that you should always be 'on', yet this energy is more easily managed when only working part-time. While both find they still think about work on their days off, it's because they love their jobs, and not out of worry.

It also allows a diversity of life experience, which drives a diversity of perspectives at work. Their current role requires leading significant reform and having two brains/two lenses helps tremendously with its scope.

Job share also opens up the breadth of executive roles available; as access is unlocked to good roles that cannot be done part-time.

While they are often asked how they reconcile themselves to decisions made when they're not there, they find instead that it's easier to relax on their days off knowing that the other one is there – having worked to build similar approaches, they know that it doesn't matter where something is left at, decisions will be made for good reasons and won't be re-litigated.

They have also learned more from having each other as a built-in development coach; they're now better at team work and collaboration, and close observation of each other's skills base has allowed them to build their own. They describe it as the ultimate coaching experience, since it provides the opportunity to be continually learning from your partner and how they approach problems. They provide regular encouragement, but also regular challenge, and both build skill as a result.

They do warn, however, of the need for great administrative support and an ecosystem open to the idea. They warmly commend their current business coordinator, who handles two diaries and working for two bosses.

They also seek regular feedback on their pace and ability to inspire direction and purpose. In this sense, job share builds their capability continuously, as the responsibility and accountability inherent in the arrangement drives a focus on prioritisation and planning skills. They feel the need to adjust and adapt that job share requires, makes them better operators overall.

"We love our job share. When Caroline comes in on a Wednesday, it feels like a weight off my shoulders. If we need to talk on our days off (on the rare occasion), I very much feel it's the other person's job that day. It really is the best of both worlds."

