Job Sharing: Two for the Price of One

By Toddi Gutner

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With unemployment topping nearly 10 percent, it's clearly an employer's job market. Companies have the upper hand to pick and choose the best and the brightest. So why would business owners go to the trouble of creating and implementing flexible work schedule alternatives in this economy?

"Companies learned from the last recession that you need to manage your employees well during a difficult time, because if they don't feel valued they are out the door emotionally during the crisis and out the door physically after the recession," says Ellen Galinsky, president of Families and Work Institute.

Employee morale continues to suffer significantly as a result of the layoffs that ripped through companies earlier this year. And with pay raises and bonuses unlikely in the near future, companies need to offer other incentives and innovative ways to reward performance. Employees increasingly value alternative work schedules, especially the younger generation, and the programs are not expensive or difficult to implement.

What's more, even in this economic climate, businesses need to maintain their ability to attract and retain talent. The cost of turnover is typically 1.5 times the lost employee's annual salary, according to Spherion, a staffing and recruiting firm.

Job sharing is one of the flexible work options that companies use to keep employees happy (if not better paid). This strategy allows two employees to share the duties of one full-time job, each working part-time. The benefits to companies are clear. "Employers can get the skills and experience of two people for the price of one, as well as full coverage for the role and a built-in backup system for sick days, vacations and other unexpected absences," says Kelly Watson, founder and president of Career Partners, a firm specializing in the support of job-sharing programs. "Plus, most job-share teams are so happy to have this arrangement and the flexibility they need, they stay longer with their companies and end up producing more than individuals in the same role."

Rich Sheridan, CEO of Menlo Innovations, a software developer in Ann Arbor, Michigan, confirms what Watson says. Sheridan's company is unique in that every position, from engineer to project manager to software designer, is performed in tandem. That means all employees work side by side and share a keyboard with another employee, and their partners change each week. Menlo Innovations also offers the traditional job-sharing option where two people work part-time to share one job. "I think we have greater productivity because each person is fresh with ideas instead of tired out by being on the job alone all week," says Sheridan.

Of course, there are drawbacks. Job sharing is likely to mean more work for your human resources manager, as there is double the paperwork with two employees instead of one. "Two people means two personalities to manage, extra coordination and communication to ensure everyone stays informed, and the possibility the team won't work well together," says Watson.

The concern that employers will have to pay for benefits twice is ill-founded. The most practical solution is to split the total compensation package for a job-share role proportionately, appropriate to each employee's contribution to the role. Generally the role is cut in half. This means that half of the compensation and benefits package goes to each participant. The only place where the company has dual payments is workers' compensation premiums.

Implementing a job-share program can be tricky, but there are steps you can take to ensure that the model works well for everyone:

- Be selective with job-share opportunities. Using an interview and matching process, try to team up two employees with complementary personalities, experience, and communication and management styles. "Just because two people want to job share is not good enough

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grounds to match them together," says Watson. She also recommends that companies pilot the program for a set time period. If the arrangement works, the opportunity should be extended to others in the organization. "Teams should be coached and, if necessary, disassembled where performance does not obtain the desired results. Conversely, teams should be rewarded, even promoted, if results are optimal," adds Watson.

- Develop a clear job description. "When job-sharing programs fail, it is often because there is a question and confusion about who is in charge," says David Javitch, president of Javitch Associates, an organizational psychology consulting firm. Make sure the responsibilities of each job-share partner are precisely described and written down. Try to divide the job according to each person's strengths.

- Devise an effective communication strategy. Consider having job-share partners share an office, a computer, e-mail and voice mail. These accounts can be accessed with one password that the employees share. You might also want them to overlap on a half-day or day to create effective transitions for bigger projects and have a built-in meeting time to make sure work doesn't slip through the cracks. "Make sure there are clear lines of communication between each other and the boss," says Javitch.

Keeping employees engaged and creating work environments that meet their needs as well as your company's are important in any type of economy. By offering job sharing, you might be ensuring that your company is one where employees want to stay, and where prospective employees will stand in line to be hired.

Toddi Gutner is an award-winning journalist, writer and editor and currently is a contributing writer covering career and management issues for The Wall Street Journal.