

Sharing Employees



...but caution is needed.

The outbreak of COVID-19 forced change in economies around the world. Because of orders from government leaders and for the safety of patrons and staff, business owners worldwide had no choice but to close their doors to ride out the storm. Those hardest-hit were in the hospitality industry: Restaurant workers, hotel staff, and other employees of businesses who relied on tourist dollars that have been shut down for months.

At the forefront of the outbreak, China felt problems first. With state-mandated quarantine and service shutdowns, unemployment across the country jumped to a record high. This left workers and business owners scrambling for solutions to bridge the gap that COVID-19 had created.

However, placing employees on furlough did not mean they were any less skilled or valuable; many companies actually faced an employee shortage as online service traffic shot up. As a result, many company leaders began to turn to sharing employees as a tool to keep workers on the job while reducing overhead.

Employee sharing -- sometimes overlapping with more traditional HR mechanisms such as job rotation, or secondment -- is a way to move workers with transferable skills from one job to another or one company to another. For example: Furloughed Chinese restaurant workers with hygiene and food preparation skills could easily transfer with minimal training to roles in high demand areas, such as grocery stores or food supply.

Through these employee sharing schemes, the original employer continued to pay for insurance and other benefits while the hosting company paid hourly wages.

According to a February report from Sixth Tone, bike-sharing outfit Hellobike opened 8,000 new positions to put furloughed workers in maintenance positions. Alibaba, which runs grocery retailer Freshippo, hired more than 5,000 temporary and seconded workers to further its own employee sharing scheme. Walmart China and 7Fresh followed suit with their own new secondment programs and were able to return their employees back to their initial jobs when the economy began to regain its composure.

It will be interesting to follow up on this new trend to see whether sharing employees continues to be used successfully as a way to create an agile labor market and support the cross-pollination of skills and expertise to drive innovation.

Now that we have seen how easily the global economy can falter from unforeseen circumstances, most business owners and workers are standing on the edge of an entirely new career model. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, every country leader and business owner had to ask how to keep their citizens and employees safe and productive, all while becoming more responsive to volatility.

Employee sharing models out of China seem to fit cleanly within the broader trend toward a more flexible workforce. Skill sets are transferable from one job to another, workforces are more agile, and teams easily distributed to cross-pollinate innovations and identify new findings in old models.

The stability of businesses and of future careers could very well be rooted in employee sharing models; but caution is needed.



Employers and recruiters are constantly challenged with managing and recruiting talent. A large part of the modern workforce is globally connected with a near-infinite number of flexible career paths. In the age of the “portfolio career,” workers are often employed with more than one employer at a time; hardly ever do they work with the same employer for life. The COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated this shift by forcing many employers to develop work-from-home and remote-office policies.

Although remote work is on the rise and likely here to stay, plans to keep employees engaged through sharing employees are still mostly in their infancy.

Historically, job sharing have rarely seen widespread use by company management. Now, with a global economy in recovery and employers having to find new ways to access new talent and reconcile their budgets, executives are showing a renewed interest in job sharing and employee sharing. The trick is to find ways to integrate this process into existing systems.

Project-driven industries in particular seem to be ripe for sharing employees. Architectural offices and interior design companies often loan out staff between departments to build specific expertise on unusual projects. Smaller companies in startup stages benefit from the cross-pollination of knowledge and expertise from job sharing in order to leverage just-in-time teams for specific tasks or durations.

It almost goes without saying: Employee sharing schemes are a great way to bring new perspectives and thinking into an organization. Between foundational knowledge that core employees can share and new perspectives that job sharing and shared employees can provide, this mix with new blood can reveal everything from long standing inefficiencies to new revenue stream potential. Cross-pollination from job sharing is so effective at driving workplace innovation, it isn't any wonder that more HR departments are taking notice and finding ways to implement the practice.

Most job sharing span anywhere from six months to one year. When crossing department lines, the originating employer often continues to pay the employee's salary and benefits; a written agreement outlines relevant terms such as the length of secondment, benefits, duties, and

responsibilities. Successful job sharing depend on a well-managed expectation of what the employee will offer, for how long, and when they should expect to resume original work assignments.

When done well, job sharing provide advantages and opportunities to the employee, the employer, and participating departments. Not only is the workforce agile, but the company becomes better equipped to handle rapidly changing market conditions.

Instead of laying off and hiring new employees to meet new demand, current employees can shift between departments. This shift can allow your employees to view their workplaces from a different angle and provide a refreshed view of their original job. job sharing can also be particularly useful with knowledge transfer and/or integrating teams after a merger.

Professional and career development – Providing employees with new challenges and opportunities to understand the company they work for only adds to their depth of knowledge toward the organization's mission and strategy. It is also a great way for an employer to acknowledge and support talented employees by providing a secondment incentive.

Job sharing works well beyond the walls of private enterprise. For example: Within a university setting, a department chair who has been seconded for a year to the president's office experiences a unique broader view of how the institution runs from the person who runs it. The presidential office provides a fast and challenging environment where team members must learn how to triage, react, and plan in a thoughtful and calibrated way.

A seconded employee will observe and participate in decision-making processes where budgetary, political, and social considerations are carefully weighed. The employee also gets to experiment with their talents in a new environment while developing new competencies in immersive leadership experience.

Employees who are fortunate enough to be seconded are often being prepared for a significant leadership role within an organization; the experience should be designed to bolster the employee's resume and future career prospects.



Benefits of employee sharing as an innovation tool

Seeing The Bigger Picture | Sharing employees provides a unique learning opportunity for the employee. They will see their organization from a different perspective. With a greater understanding of how different units handle competing priorities, they can better appreciate the value of a team's contribution from two perspectives. Overall, job sharing gives employees motivation to engage more with other department employees, which in turn can deliver a positive impact on productivity and employee retention.

Innovating New Skill Sets | Add fresh blood to a department -- things will change. If the plan is to innovate and find new efficiencies within a department, loaning an employee may do just the trick. A seconded employee can champion for change or drive initiative that management has tried to implement. Whether in technology, process, or solutions, job sharing can drive significant change where it is most needed.

Knowledge transfer | Employers can spend time guessing or they can bring in an expert. In the event of implementing new policies or technologies, a seconded employee can serve as a cost-effective subject matter expert. Within a specific role, they can train colleagues in acquiring new skills. Every so often, World Bank will second an employee to a developing country in order to provide technical assistance with anti-poverty programs. This employee is financed by a multi-agency loan.

Merger and acquisition – cross-pollination | Job sharing programs are uniquely essential when two organizations merge into one new entity. In this case, an employee from the buying group serves as an intermediary who promotes open communication for both organizations. The employee translates company language, culture, and policy to acquired employees and at the same time fosters understanding between parties. The seconded employee can also establish credibility and goodwill by answering questions, anticipating needs, and responding to emerging challenges.

At the Frontiers

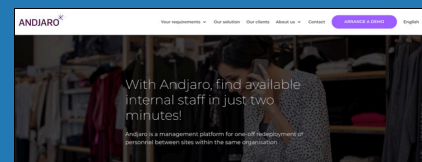
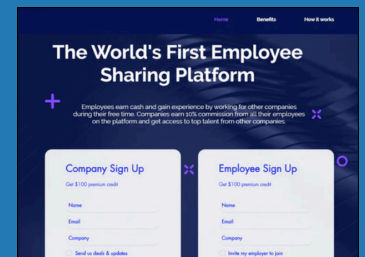
Because of an agile workforce and fluid career development, several new technology platforms have emerged as a result of—and a benefit to—job sharing. These technologies allow employer and employee to proactively advertise and seek opportunities.



Hema forms an emergency secondment coalition in China

During the emergence of the COVID-19 virus, the Alibaba grocery delivery service Hema faced a spike in demand while other employers were forced to send employees home. By forming partnerships with dozens of caterers and restaurants, Hema acquired a workforce who already had food hygiene training. Many other Chinese companies followed their example. **Source: www.news.cn**

Flexo creates a digital worker-sharing marketplace
Flexo is a global employee sharing platform which allows employees to earn cash and gain experience by freelancing for other companies during their free time. **Source: <https://www.itselflexo.com>**



Andjaro offers a platform for numerous flexible career solutions, including employee sharing

Andjaro has developed a platform to take on several responsibilities of any company's HR. Their solutions include a secondment marketplace where employees and company leaders can advertise available opportunities or interests. **Source: <https://www.andjaro.com>**





Traditional companies using job sharing

During this time when employee sharing initiatives are having a “moment” with new companies and a “new normal” way of work, many traditional companies are already relying on secondment schemes that promote innovation and productivity and provide incentives and opportunities for employee professional advancement and personal growth. For example:

The Boston Consulting Group (BCG) | BCG uses job sharing to help employees adapt to an international, inclusive, and multicultural work ethic. The firm deals with global clients who have a strong presence in many parts of the world; their secondment programs empower employees to add value wherever they go. Whether they work with the World Health Organization or Save the Children charity, BCG employees spend one year assisting several partner organizations. The seconded employee gains a thorough, hands-on experience to further understand the partner organization’s mission and operation.

The US Agency for International Development (USAID) | USAID frequently assigns its employees to work with governmental organizations around the world in a knowledge-transfer capacity. Host organizations are agencies in developing countries that have received grants or loans. The seconded employee offers a wealth of information to the host organization, including training new mothers in health practices or implementing anti-poverty initiatives. The experience offers a significant opportunity for social change, which in turn creates inspiring and transformative moments for the “loaned” expert.

Atlassian | Developer of popular team management and collaboration tools JIRA and Trello, Atlassian regularly uses job sharing to enable employees to grow skills, approach new challenges, and stay incentivized and motivated. The secondment experience promotes collaboration and innovation within the company. It is also one reason for their high employee retention rate.

The Argo Group | This specialty insurance company assists workers—especially young employees—to develop new capabilities that will help them function in a global marketplace. Employees are given opportunities to be seconded to parts of the world where Argo has a presence. These employees acquire valuable customer perspectives at local, national, and international levels.

Approach With Caution

While employee sharing has the potential to help organizations to more readily innovate and adapt in the face of volatility, there are also potential drawbacks if not handled carefully. In particular, it is important to ensure that these tools do not add to a sense of precarity for employees. Before establishing a secondment or employee sharing scheme, take time to manage expectations. Every step needs to be clear and consistent for all parties involved, from the work expected, the communication needed, and information transferred. A few things to consider include:

- » **The point and potential of a secondment is to develop employees in areas where current roles or departments might not provide what they need and/or to drive more agility in the face of uncertainty.**
- » **Employee sharing should not be run as a for-profit service.**
- » **Have a clear, written employee sharing agreement that outlines roles and expectations, salary, additional benefits, and time scale. The agreement needs to be signed by all three parties. An employee may also need an adaptation of their current employment contract.**
- » **Remember that managing employee sharing schemes can be labor-intensive.**
- » **Employee sharing can cause considerable personal upheaval, especially when the role involves a transfer to another country or region; the move can impact their entire family’s lives.**
- » **Ensure that the scheme and especially “loaning” an employee to another company or partner institution is well within the country’s regulations and employment laws. Keep necessary documentation and a fair and transparent process overall.**

Conclusion

Collaborating and engaging with people from diverse backgrounds—especially from different cultures and skill sets—provides fertile ground to germinate new ideas and unique solutions for any business in any country. Job sharing and employee sharing provide opportunities for team members to gain new insights and perspectives that will help organizations to remain competitive and innovative, all while working toward a common goal.

In this fast-paced world of work and an ever-changing employment environment, secondment and employee sharing schemes provide company leaders worldwide with tools to adjust to an increasing need for adaptation to consistently changing economic situations 