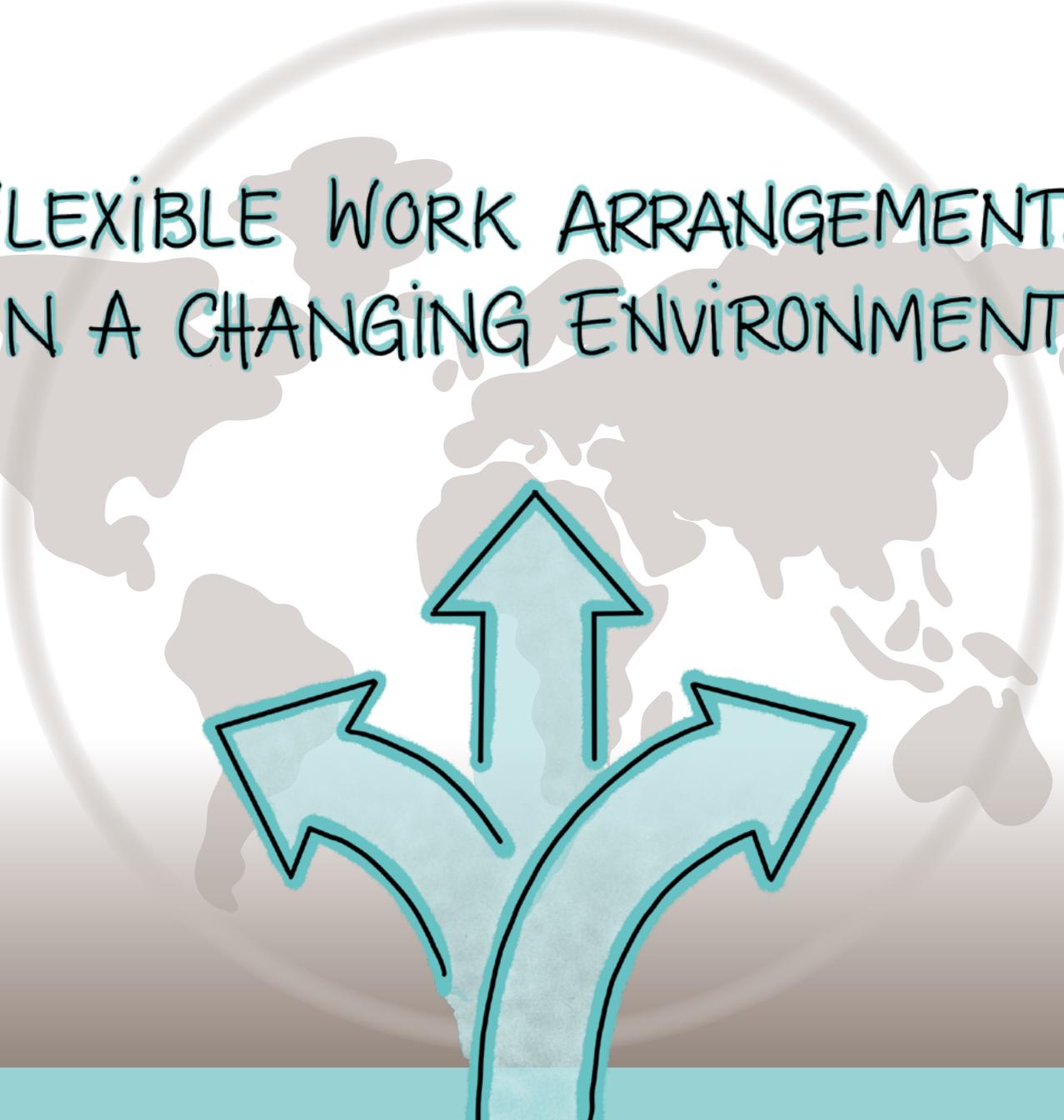


FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS IN A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

A compilation of best practices from the international
cooperation

FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS IN A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT



cinfo 

The Swiss Centre of Competence
for International Cooperation

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Introduction

Work-life balance is a societal issue of particular relevance in the field of international cooperation (IC). Balancing international careers as part of a couple, working in difficult contexts, or regularly changing the place of assignment, requires a lot of flexibility from employees in the sector. These situations can be made more manageable by flexible working conditions.

In the last decade expectations have evolved: work-life balance has become a major criterion for job seekers and employees, a finding further supported by the [cinfo study on young professionals](#). Offering flexible working conditions therefore allows employers to increase their attractiveness and staff retention, all the more so in a sector that cannot always compete on salary. This is particularly relevant in the current context of shortages of qualified personnel for certain types of jobs, in addition to the forthcoming retirement of the baby boomer generation, for whom a replacement will have to be secured.

On the employer's side, the benefits of introducing more flexible work models are numerous:

- Improving employer attractiveness and employee retention;
- Enhancing employee satisfaction and loyalty;
- Boosting employee attendance and reducing absenteeism;
- Increasing productivity;
- Moving towards greater sustainability by lowering carbon emissions;
- Enabling business continuity in crisis situations such as a climate disaster or pandemic.

Of course, these advantages vary depending on the type of work model. For example, job sharing increases the amount of brainpower available for a given position; sabbaticals promote the transfer of knowledge and its distribution over several people; remote working reduces travel time, and so on.

Unfortunately, these models are not yet widely applied in the IC sector. This is why cinfo, as a centre of competence, has collected “success stories” from within and outside international cooperation. While there are already several publications on flexible models across job markets, this one focuses on the specific needs and particularities of the IC sector.

The success stories are intended to provide insight into the existing models in the sector, to give practical advice and lessons learned and to help recognise the pitfalls and conditions for success of flexible models. This collection of best practice examples is primarily intended for employers in the sector, in particular human resources managers and line managers, but also for (future) employees who can draw inspiration for their careers.

Flexibility is an essential element for everyone to achieve a sustainable and healthy work-life balance. It is only possible when the organisation, the manager and the employee work together.

- **The organisation's leadership and human resources** set the strategic direction that supports the policy framework and cultural norms. This includes providing clarity of expectations and roles. Effective job design, system and processes are key for a performant organisation.
- **The manager's** role is to actively work with employees to support the search and implementation of solutions which respond to individual needs and are fair and equitable to everyone while balancing work requirements and strengthening performance standards.
- **The employee's** responsibility is to assume ownership of their career and individual goals, and to work with the organisation and management to identify solutions which work for all parties.

Types of models

Flexible working models vary depending on the element that is made flexible, i.e. the management of working hours, the amount of working time or the place of work. Some models can be combined. Here is a non-exhaustive list of flexible working models:

- **Flexible scheduling**
 - Flexible working hours
 - Compressed workweek
 - Annualised hours
- **Flexible duration of work**
 - Part-time work (various percentages)
 - Job and top sharing
- **Flexible space**
 - Hoteling / Satellite office
 - Working from home
 - Teleworking abroad / Digital nomads

Compressed workweek. This method allows employees to work a standard workweek over a period of fewer than five days. For example, some employers implement a four-day workweek of 10-hour days. Employers get the same number of working hours, but employees have a three-day weekend every week. This can facilitate careers at a significant distance from home, for example, as the employee has a long weekend to commute.

Banking of hours / Annualised hours. A model with annualised hours specifies the total number of hours to be worked per year, instead of a total per week. It is useful when the needs of the organisation vary according to the time of year or when the employee needs more flexibility. A person may, for example, have an 80 % contract and yet work at 100 % for a period of the year in order to have a long period of leave. Where the functioning of the organisation permits, this model allows the employee to take long periods of time off to commute, if the family or partner lives at a distance.

Job and top sharing. In this model, two or more employees share a full-time position. It is called top sharing when the position has a high-level of responsibility. Each of the job sharing partners works a part-time schedule, but together they are co-responsible for the duties of one full-time position. The practice allows for part-time schedules in positions that the employer would not otherwise offer on a part-time basis. It requires a high degree of compatibility, communication and cooperation between the job sharing partners and with their manager, see [Job sharing guide](#). As Médecins Sans Frontières' story shows (see page 6), this model can be used to share a complex job in a fragile area and allow job sharing partners to take turns.

Hoteling / Satellite office. This is a practice related to telework. It consists of asking teleworkers to reserve a desk or workstation for their days in the office, sometimes with several office locations to choose from, instead of allocating them a permanent workspace. Hoteling can reduce the organisation's office space requirements and cut costs. It allows employees to work closer to home even when working from home is not an option. It is convenient for people working internationally in an organisation that has offices in several countries.

Teleworking abroad / Digital nomads. Some activities can be located anywhere. An organisation might be able to attract a better and larger labour force if they can work from their desired place. This model can help combine international dual careers for a couple, as it allows one partner to move with the other while keeping their job.



Loredana Contaldi

HR-Specialist
Nexlore AG, Switzerland

How Simon became a digital nomad.

“ You decide when, where and how you work – exactly in the way that best suits the current project and your life situation.

The story I want to share



We follow the principle of “Safe enough to try”. Our openness but also the need in dealing with flexible working models makes it easier for us to engage with this topic on an ongoing basis. We can therefore anticipate the needs of our employees, taking into account their life situation, while at the same time being aware of the challenges.

In 2015, we were confronted with Simon's request. Simon wanted to spend longer periods travelling without losing touch with his IT-job-environment, including the fast-paced IT technology. For our part, it was important to keep Simon on our team. His request unconsciously led to the work model of the digital nomad. Simon could continue to work for us to a certain extent, independent of the location, whilst realising his desire to travel abroad. Since

this model was a first for us with no prior experience, the project was initially set for six months with an option to extend. We also agreed to evaluate the situation regularly and, if necessary, make adaptations. The decisive factors were to meet the needs of both sides and to take the customers' requirements into account.

As a software engineer, remote work can be very easily accommodated. Digital nomads can usually work from anywhere with just a few minor provisions. We did not note any adverse effects on the daily routine or customer service.

It was a very positive and educational experience for all of us. Other employees have now joined Simon working remotely from time to time.

What it requires

Remote working also poses challenges – be it from a business point of view or an employee's point of view:



- Good planning in advance (transfer of work, knowledge transfer)
- Determining contactability (time difference)
- Keeping in touch – regular conversations at short intervals
- Internet connection and access abroad
- Willingness to compromise + flexibility (job content and responsibilities change. Certain tasks that require immediate response, for example, can no longer be undertaken)
- Verifying customers' requirements and possible limitations
- Data protection
- Tax and labour law issues, social security matters
- Maintaining a network – keeping in touch
- Be committed and invest time keeping up to date (e.g. facilitates reintegration on return)

Benefits

How else could we benefit?

- Forward-thinking planning is generally a learning process and of great benefit to everyday project management (irrespective of the working model)
- Knowledge and responsibility are distributed among several people. This reduces cluster risk allowing employees to develop further
- No loss of knowledge resulting from dismissal
- Employees are satisfied and feel valued
- Life experience and broadening of horizons is profitable all round
- Leaving the comfort zone – dealing with new situations or circumstances and finding viable solutions





Lisa Lang and Tony Zuber

Co-Heads Resources Field
Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA, Swiss
Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC,
Humanitarian Aid and SHA

1+1 = 3 How job sharing creates value for an organisation



Tony brings fresh ideas that help us move forward.
Lisa Lang

Lisa strengthens my back with her experience.
Tony Zuber

Your story about new work arrangements



The day-to-day challenge of selecting, planning and preparing a roster of about 600 Swiss experts in humanitarian aid to be deployed for short and long-term missions in fragile contexts around the globe – like South Sudan, Myanmar, Syria or Venezuela – is a big responsibility. In German, we use the term "Eierlegende Wollmilchsau", referring to the fact that it's impossible to cover all the skillset required for such a complex job in one person, a so-called "superhero". So why not split this complex job into two positions where you divide tasks and share responsibilities?

This is exactly what we have done at SDC, Humanitarian Aid Unit. With over 20 years of HR experience in the Humanitarian Aid Unit (SHA) and a sixth sense for what is going on under the surface, Lisa Lang takes care of selection, planning and organisation of the SHA missions. As a newcomer from the private

sector with eight years of field experience in peace-building in Latin America, I took over the learning and development section to strengthen organisational change and development. In a Co-Lead model, we are responsible and accountable for the Resources Field section. With over 20 employees, together as a team, Lisa and I take important decisions to best fulfil the mandate of Humanitarian Aid: Save lives and alleviate suffering.

Job sharing gives us a safe space to discuss challenging issues with a true sparring partner. It allows the different stakeholders inside and outside the organisation the possibility to address relevant issues with the person they feel most appropriate. This helps create a work culture based on diversity, knowledge and shared responsibility.

In a nutshell: Mix gender, technical expertise and age to increase your chances of getting more added value for your organisation and yourself.

Lessons learnt / Prerequisites

- It's impossible to overestimate how strongly it depends on the personalities and complementarities of the involved persons to make it work
- Clear definition of roles and responsibilities, avoid same tasks in both job descriptions
- Make sure the stakeholders understand the concept of job and top sharing (communication is key)



Remaining challenges

- You never agree on everything: communication and knowing when to step back will always be challenging
- Transfer the culture of job sharing throughout the whole organisation
- Finding a suitable successor to replace Lisa's experience after retirement in 2022





Roya Milani

HR Project Manager, International
Compensation and Benefits Advisor

How we pioneered job sharing in the field.



Job sharing is almost like a marriage contract: the two people need to align in essential aspects.

The story I want to share



We have challenges in staffing our missions in very insecure contexts, with high turnover rates and negative effects on team stability and the institutional memory. Working in such tense contexts exposes our managers to complex situations in terms of networking, security and HR management as well as day-to-day operations.

We started a pilot project in 2018 to introduce job sharing for the Head of Mission (HoM) position in Iraq. The tandem was selected after an initial period of matchmaking potential candidates. Each HoM had an 80% contract, working 2 months in the mission and 2 months from their home, and agreed on the rotation schedule between themselves. The HoMs complemented each other's role by working in tandem; the HoM in the mission country was

responsible for operations while the HoM working from their home country performed support roles. Each HoM therefore experienced both roles.

This solution led to a position with improved working conditions and reduced turnover rates – a win for both the employees and the organisation. During 2017, the Iraq mission had an extremely high turnover with 7 different HoMs as well as periods without a HoM. With this job-sharing alternative, we reduced the risk of turn-over to zero for two consecutive years in 2018-2019.

Based on the positive feedback that we've had on the tandem experience, we'll probably use it again. However, it's not possible to estimate how often as it depends on the context and operational needs.

Lessons learnt

Consequences of the job-sharing solution:

- Increased possibility of deployment and therefore enforced stability in mission
- Preserved institutional memory
- More contact with the external environment
- Better networking
- Increased capacity due to accumulated professional experience
- Less isolation in the position



Remaining challenges

- Duration: two months is too short in terms of work pressure and setting tasks
- Increased fatigue due to frequent travel
- De-prioritization of certain dossiers
- Different ways of working and management styles
- Information loss
- Hard to disengage from operation role while working from home





Manuela Häfeli and Kathrin Indermaur

co-Heads HR Department
Helvetas

Co-chairing an HR department



The scope of competencies and experience needed for this position simply cannot be covered by one person.

The story I want to share

How does it work when two heads run an HR department?

We have been sharing the position of Head of HR for a year at Helvetas. Before that, Kathrin was already co-lead for four years. Having divided both the subject areas and the direct line management of our employees, we can ensure that everyone has a contact person for specific topics or for issues relevant to management.

This form of work enables us to manage the department and strategic and content-related HR projects, where we very often have a strong exchange of

ideas, thus benefiting from each other's different experiences and competencies. We can also coach each other in critical and challenging situations, as we share a high degree of trust... and we simply enjoy working together as a team!

Our staff agree it's "a good thing" and a sign that Helvetas promotes modern working methods. As an HR department, we are naturally proud of this. Of course, you may need to get two opinions when introducing a new project or process, but this is generally part of the Helvetas culture, because participative behaviour is important to us.



Lessons learnt

Exchanging ideas at this level is very inspiring. It releases not only creative ideas, but also the energy needed to implement them.

It is always necessary to coordinate who will work on specific challenges in the operational HR business. There is no clear division of tasks, especially when it comes to complex issues.

It requires a working environment (e.g. our team, our Management board) that values different approaches and personalities and sees this as an added value.



Remaining challenges

The perception regarding the division of responsibilities may sometimes need additional coordination between us.





Isabel Günther

Professor of Economics
ETH Zürich, NADEL Centre for
Development and Cooperation

People sometimes need change to evolve – sometimes without a reason.



To get the best from people, remember that people bring back new ideas from other settings.

The story I want to share



At NADEL, we believe that providing flexibility to our team members allows them to develop their competencies and stay highly motivated.

We allow everybody to take a one-month unpaid leave per year without any particular reason or explanation. This time off is typically used for longer holidays, to visit families abroad, or to spend extra time with children.

Longer unpaid leave (up to six months) is also permitted, and the person concerned has to clarify their motivation. These are mainly taken to work for a semester in another university. Normally, ETH/NADEL pay for part of this time.

Our 25 team members have around one unpaid leave per year.

Organisations now have to offer various forms of flexible working conditions.

Unpaid leave is just one example where NADEL matches its employees' needs. In addition to this, NADEL offers generous home office options (2-3 days per week), part-time work between 50-90% at all hierarchical levels, the possibility to stay at home to take care of family members and the possibility to bring children to the office, to name a few.

We have a social code of conduct that outlines the rights and duties of our team members. We developed this together as a team and update it every three years. This collaboration is an effective way to learn about employees' needs.

What it requires

- Team members are highly motivated by their job and want to develop on a personal level
- Team members highly trust each other
- Team members are willing to take over the work of others
- Several team members can complete most tasks



How do we organise the workload?

Shorter leave: One-month leave must be announced six months in advance. The person taking the leave is responsible for projects undertaken in that particular year. Shorter leave should not affect the work of others.

Longer leave: The team distributes tasks amongst themselves. The leave has to be well-planned and discussed within the team – who will take over what task when the person is away?





Ursula Jenny

Human Resources
Solidar Suisse

Unpaid Leave & Unpaid Parental Leave



Allowing yourself time off without having to give up everything.

Your story about new work arrangements



Unpaid leave gives our employees an excellent opportunity to fulfil a dream, be it a trip, a hobby, voluntary work, further education or spending more time with their children, without giving everything up.

With this in mind, we offer all employees the possibility to apply for unpaid leave for up to 6 consecutive months from the fourth year of employment. This is applicable over 5 years of employment, i.e. the unpaid leave may be split into individual months, with a maximum of 6 months within 5 years.

We also offer unpaid parental leave. All employees can apply for unpaid parental leave up to a maximum of 6 months during the child's first year. As an

alternative to unpaid parental leave, there is the possibility of reducing work hours for a one-year period, the lowest limit being 40%.

There have been a number of employees who have taken advantage of this offer in recent years. The circumstances range from taking a few weeks to 6 months of parental leave, going on a two-month trip, spending the summer cheese-making in the Alps and working as a ski instructor over the winter season.

The challenge of covering the workload during the employee's absence has been solved in various ways by distributing the work to colleagues who agree to increase their workload during this time or by temporarily hiring new staff.

Lessons learnt / Prerequisites

Everything is possible, but it requires a certain degree of willingness to try something new! What are the necessary preconditions for this to work?

- Good planning and early announcement (hiring temporary staff takes time)
- Requests should be approved – not YES for one person and then NO for the next
- As a team, decide how the replacement will be organised – it is a great opportunity for team members to learn and develop. Important: do not simply distribute the work but also toy with increasing the workload
- The same job must be in place upon the employee's return
- HR must be prepared to deal with social security concerns (AHV, accident, KTG, pension fund, child allowance)



- Make a written agreement with the employee
- The fear that all employees will demand unpaid leave is completely unfounded
- There is a possibility that employees may quit after taking unpaid leave, but this is definitely not the rule

Where else have we been able to benefit from this?

- Satisfied employees
- Recruiting new staff, gaining new ideas and views; both sides benefit
- Knowledge and responsibility are distributed among several people
- No loss of knowledge due to termination
- Testing new things, learning new things
- Getting rid of the fear of the unknown



Conclusion and practical advices

The good practice examples we have gathered show that even if the international cooperation sector still has a lot of room for improvement, working conditions are evolving towards greater flexibility.

Certain types of models are more widespread than others: job sharing is starting to make its way into headquarters, teleworking from home has become mainstream with the covid crisis, organisations that still have fixed working hours are becoming rare. On the other hand, digital nomadism or job sharing for positions based abroad, for example, are still limited.

The rise of digital communication and collaboration tools, which make it possible to be less dependent on location and to collaborate effectively at a distance, will certainly favour such models in the coming years.

Of course, the implementation of flexible working models like teleworking or working from abroad requires a good understanding of all aspects, including legal ones. Inspiration from other sectors and successful practices in international cooperation can help find workable solutions.

For an effective implementation of a new type of work arrangement, organisations can seek advice and guidance in the process. To this end, cinfo is now offering coaching for the implementation of job and top sharing models. We are happy to answer your questions about this service at consultation@cinfo.ch.

Your cinfo Team

www.cinfo.ch/publications

Resources

Articles, studies and resources on this topic

[Flexible Working Arrangements for a modern and productive workforce, UN HR portal](#)

[How flexible working arrangements vary around the globe, Personnel Today](#)

[Employee flexibility toolkit, Australian Government](#)

[Wie verändert Covid-19 die Global Mobility Policies?, HR Today](#)

[6 guidelines to implement a successful flexible workplace culture, Randstad Risesmart](#)

[How To Create A Successful Flexible Work Culture, Forbes](#)

[Flexible Working Arrangements and Organizational Performance: An Overview, Austin-Egole et al.](#)

Impressum

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Irenka Krone and Loraine Ding

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September 2022



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On behalf of the Swiss Confederation and in collaboration
with the main organisations in the sector.