

Balancing Life and Work in Dance

How small changes can have a big impact on parents and carers working in the performing arts, by Helen Laws.



In a global climate where businesses and governments (most recently in Finland, Japan and New Zealand) are trialing and seriously discussing the merits of a four-day working week, what could a more flexible and progressive approach to working practices mean for the dance profession?

Inspired by conversations started at the Parents in Performing Arts (PiPA) Dance, Orchestra and Opera Consultation in the summer of 2019, there are some key areas that could really make a difference, not only to parents and those with caring responsibilities but to the work-life balance of all of us working in the performing arts.

PiPA's research (pipacampaign.com/balancing-act-survey/) found that 43% of those leaving the performing arts profession cited difficulty juggling career demands with parental responsibilities as the main contributing factor (with 'finances' following as a close second). Some issues such as availability/expense of childcare are obvious barriers for parents that dance has in common with other, especially lower paid, professions, and perhaps touring will never be easy for those with caring responsibilities at home. However, there are certainly areas where an openness to alternative ways of working may not only make it easier for parents to continue working but also help to create an environment that is healthier and more productive for all those working in the performing arts, at whatever stage of their life or career.

At the PiPA event there was a general consensus, backed up by research in other industries (e.g. [phys.org/news/2019-10-happy-workers-productive*](http://phys.org/news/2019-10-happy-workers-productive)) that happier employees make better, more productive and creative employees. Being better able to juggle the demands of life and work is certainly conducive to happiness and arguably therefore to effectiveness at work and home.

"More transparent and inclusive scheduling, some performers have argued, would benefit every facet of the company."

SCHEDULES

Parents from all the performing arts have repeatedly raised scheduling as a core issue. Issues including not knowing what your schedule is going to be until the week before (as is commonplace in ballet companies and in theatre/musical theatre), being called for long rehearsals and then not actually being used for large periods of time, being expected to

stay late at very short notice, and working six-day weeks, all make it difficult to organise childcare (or have a private life) as well as not being the most efficient use of time, from the perspective of 'periodising' dancers' training to improve performance and injury prevention. See page 36 for an article on periodising dancer training.**

Obviously there are always going to be unforeseen circumstances (e.g. injury, illness) that may require last minute changes or some extra work, but how many of the aforementioned practices are down to 'that's how it's always worked', or accepted as just being a dancer's/performer's way of life, without question? Tour dates are generally known well in advance, why not planned rehearsal schedules too, particularly on revivals? Opera Holland Park now makes its schedules available to all two months in advance.

Would we do things differently, one dancer asked, if we were to set up a large-scale dance company from scratch now? At New Adventures, each production or tour is treated as its own entity and therefore performers engaged for a production (often on long contracts, some up to 18 months) will know the full rehearsal and touring schedule far in advance, making it more straightforward to plan for, and agree hours at the point of contracting.

"Performing eight shows a week for a year is a lot for any performer, whether or not they are a parent, so job sharing could be a sensible practice worth adopting more often."

In a large-scale traditional 'rep' company, with dancers employed on full-time permanent contracts and rehearsing for/performing in numerous different productions at any one time, scheduling is clearly very complicated. However, almost because of the inherent complexity and multiple moving parts anyway, would it make a huge difference to accommodate a job share? Wouldn't it be helpful for all members of the company to be fully abreast of the whole picture earlier on?

Dancers are obviously central to a company's work and are not only required for performance and rehearsal but for outreach work, press and PR, guest appearances etc., and things like rehab and supplemental training also need to be given time, let alone rest and recovery! While creating a workable schedule, particularly for a large company, is probably an art and job in itself, making sure that every department, including the dancers themselves, can feed into and/or have sight of schedules with as much notice as possible will allow everyone to plan and manage their time better. This would be particularly helpful to enable managers to understand the constraints and pinch points, making it easier to identify availability (or not) for any additional demands.

JOB SHARING

Interwoven with the impact of scheduling on parents'/carers' ability to work, and all dancers' ability to balance work and rest from a life, fitness and health perspective, is the question of openness to job sharing or part-time working.

In theory, ballet companies and musical theatre productions, which already operate a system of second casts or covers for roles should be amazing at doing this. The problem occurs when despite this, most dancers are 'on' in some capacity all the time (more of an issue for corps de ballet and smaller dance companies). Being reliant on 100% of your cast being

100% fit for 100% of performances is a problem in an industry where injury is common. Could more part-time job sharing help not only parents wanting to return to work but also reduce incidences of overload and burnout leading to injury, and create some slack in the system? If you have two people sharing a role and not performing all the time, when one is injured, there might be room to negotiate the other stepping in for a while as the exception rather than the rule.

Recently we have seen some high-profile performer job sharing in the West End: Charlene Ford in 42nd Street in late 2018, followed by Lizzie Wort and Ruth Calkin each performing half of the weekly schedule in Twirlywoos Live in early 2019. All performers talked about having to have courage to push the issue but found it worked well.

Florence Andrews, former cast member of School of Rock who was campaigning for changes in February 2018 pointed out, "There's already what's called an alternate system, which sees lead performers in musicals miss one or more show a week in a demanding role." Ballet company principal dancers also have the privilege of working in this way.

New Adventures have had some success with job shares too, expressing how beneficial it can be all round. For example, a job share for a resident director role allowed flexibility around caring responsibilities for an experienced artist and a professional development opportunity for another company member stepping up into the role. The attitude at the company, which, importantly, has many parents in its senior leadership, is 'let's see what's possible'.

With good role models, showing that it is possible to better balance work and family life, and with conversations about flexible working being initiated by management, an environment of trust can be created where everyone knows it isn't about the hours you work but the effort you put in while you are working.

With thanks to PiPA, Dance Mama, Imogen Kinchin, Tom Rogers and Moira McCormack.

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more research, resources, and insights browse:

dancemama.org/stories

pipacampaign.com/

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** Please note, this link no longer works. We are working to update these links to ensure accuracy.*

*** This refers to Issue 8 of One magazine, where this article was originally published.*

