

Jo Parkes

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Interviewed by Marie Synakewicz

Those who have grown up with horses and have been riding for some time know how much reward there is in being an equestrian. The hours of mucking out stables and the buckets of sweat left in the arena become irrelevant when both horse and rider execute the perfect jump, the perfect piaffe, the perfect sliding stop. Training and competing with horses does not only require superior equine and human fitness, but also a large amount of commitment and perseverance. Horse work demands time, which means it is challenging to combine with full-time employment and long commutes.

Jo graduated with a BSc in Chemistry from Durham. Afterwards, she trained as an accountant and subsequently started to work for DEFRA, where she became project manager for the Pesticides Safety Directorate later on. Her chemistry knowledge helped her out on multiple occasions when she had to assess pesticide trials because there was only a limited amount of chemists available. As DEFRA underwent a massive re-organisation, Jo took voluntary redundancy to pay off her student loan and then started working University of York in their research office then moving to the Green Chemistry Centre of Excellence. At all times she was able to keep a horse and spend time training and competing in Showjumping and Dressage up to a national level, because her employments were under a flexi-time agreement. When her job demanded it she stayed longer, but was able to take these hours off at a later time. This way, over a period of one month she would usually accrue one or two days *in lieu*. These days she would use to leave early two afternoons for training sessions, or kept for horse-related emergencies. When the funding for her post at the University of York was about to run out, Jo made the decision that she would move to Cambridgeshire.

Within one week of starting her employment with the Finance Division here at Cambridge Jo was able to agree on adjusted hours with her line manager. She starts working at 8am and finished at 4pm most days. Since her horse is in part-livery she goes to the stables which are about an hour away, every evening for mucking out, feeding and to work her horse. One advantage of these slightly shifted times is that she misses the worst of the traffic both here and at home. Trainers rarely offer to teach in the late evening and therefore it is a very tight fit when she has to commute and get her horse warmed up before 6pm for a lesson. If, for whatever reason, Jo has to leave much later than 4pm, she is often stuck in traffic resulting in even longer evenings. She wished she did not have that long a drive to the stables but it was rather difficult to find a livery yard that was not too expensive, where they could take care of the horse in the mornings, provide winter turnout and most importantly which had a floodlit arena – a crucial element for training in winter. “Yorkshire is a much better horse country,” Jo says, “and the livery was significantly cheaper!”

Jo has managed teams on flexi-time herself before and has found that everybody is more motivated. People will stay significantly longer to get the work done, but then their reward might be leaving early on a Friday afternoon. Although her life’s passion is for horses, Jo is quite realistic and acknowledges that the costs of supporting a horse and competing nationally will always necessitate a financially stable job. Therefore, it will always require some effort to combine her roles in finance and as an equestrian.