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A Job Title to Transform You

By Joe Mullich

When I read the news report that Bill Gates was stepping down as chief executive officer of Microsoft, I thought, "This guy is an idiot."

It didn't bother me that Gates was quitting his 9-to-5 job. I wouldn't punch a time clock either, if I were the world's richest man.

Gates probably loses more money under his couch cushions than I make in a year. It didn't bother me that Gates was giving up responsibilities for day-to-day operations so he can return, as he said, "to what I love most -- focusing on technology for the future."

What I thought was stupid was that Gates created a silly new job title for himself. He is now Microsoft's "chief software architect."

"Chief software architect" sounds like someone who dreams up new video games. Why on earth does a person as rich and famous as Gates even need a job title? And if he really does want a title, shouldn't it be a title that means something?

Which is why I am the one who's an idiot, not Gates.

Let me explain. Everyone agrees that Gates won't be giving up any power and can pretty much do whatever he wants.

So why did he feel the need to change titles? These days, offbeat job titles are in vogue, especially in the high technology world.

I think Gates just wanted to prove he was "with it."

A business magazine called *Fast Company* ran a column called "Job Titles of the Future," profiling oddly titled executives at technology companies. There were "ministers of progress" at Aspen Tree Software. Pixar Animation Studio has "animation skeptics." Gateway 2000 uses "imagination officers."

Nobody, it seems, has "managers" or "vice presidents" anymore. I think Gates felt "chief executive officer" is way too blah for someone of his imagination.

Personally, I'd be scared to death if I were summoned to see an "imagination officer." It sounds too Big Brother-ish to me.

I hate the title.

Which is another reason why I am an idiot. Recruitment specialists say "creative titling" has become a way to lure hard-to-find techno-geeks. Motley Fool, an online financial publication, found it's easier to recruit workers by giving them business cards with titles such as -- and these are all real -- "chief techie geek," "LAN/Database God," and "FoolWare techie programmer."

In days past, recruitment people said having an unusual title was a hindrance when you went to look for a new job. After all, would you even read the resume of someone who spent the last year as a "senior completion specialist" if you needed a project manager?

In reality, both titles are for the same job. But "project manager" sounds so old-fashioned, you wouldn't have a chance to get a job at an Internet startup and cash in when it went public. Today, technology workers bristle at standard titles, believing them demeaning. The world changes so fast that if a job title is understandable, many think it means the person holding it is behind the times.

Chief executive officer? You're right, Bill -- sounds like your dad's job title.

Some firms go so far as to do away with titles altogether, to keep the natives from getting restless. One computer training firm instead placed a recruitment ad seeking "talented 'you-betchyas' with a positive, whole-hearted attitude who would love teaching computers."

Imagine going to a party and telling people that you make your living as a "you-betchya." But now even non-technology jobs are using absurd titles. I'm meeting public relations people who call themselves "perception managers." So if Bill Gates wants to call himself "chief software architect," I now say go ahead. He can afford to print up the business cards.

However, I wish he'd have gone with something a little more exotic. His old rival, former Apple chief executive John Scully, for instance, used to call himself "chief listener."

Instead of calling himself "chief software architect," I wish Gates had declared he was Microsoft's "sultan of software."

Now there's a job title for the 2000s!

My humorous essays and columns have appeared in dozens of newspapers and magazines. [Email me](#) if you'd like to see some that are available for reprint.