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IN THE NEWS

- Midlands
- Sports
- Business**
- Nation & World
- Opinion
- Living
- GO! Entertainment
- TV Listings
- Obituaries
- AP Update

NEWS EXTRAS

- Big Red Page
- HS SportsZone
- War on Terrorism
- Decision 2002
- More News Extras

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- Archives
- Info Center
- Subscriptions

Careers

ShopOmaha®

Restaurant Guide

E-Coupons/Offers

AutoMall

Real Estate

Classifieds

Money & Investing

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Business

- » [MAIN](#)
- » [AP News](#)
- » [21-Day Archive](#)



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What's in a title?

BY GRACE SHIM
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

What is in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.

William Shakespeare crafted those words in his tragic romantic tale, "Romeo and Juliet." But the English bard's words easily could refer to today's business world, where Chief Executive of Love, Crayon Evangelist, Slave Boy or C3P0 are actual job titles people place after their names.



Kelly Muchemore decided Director of Chaos captures her job at organizing Berkshire Hathaway's annual meeting.

A relatively small but growing number of executives are favoring a title that mixes poetic license, humor, ambiguity and job description over the ho-hum chief executive officer, president, human resources specialist or systems analyst.

And why not? A client is more likely to remember a Crayon Evangelist than a graphic designer.

Online business magazine Fast Company has archived articles on unique job titles. The CEO of Love runs America Online's matchmaking service. Slave Boy is a marketing intern at Amazing Online Marketing.

C3P0, while sharing the name of the famous "Star Wars" droid sidekick to Luke Skywalker, is an acronym for Chief People, Progress and Potential Officer, or C3PO. C3PO's job in this galaxy is also known as recruiter and human resources worker.



Clever titles aren't limited to the high-tech hinterlands.

Darcie Krueger is "President and Chief Dog Lover" of her online pet supply business, SitStay.com, based in Lincoln. Her husband is "Vice President and Chief Dog Spoiler."

"We treat our site with a lot of humor, so we use that with our titles."

Rita Cherek is the "Power Behind the Throne," a title she came up with when she and her husband, Tony, bought Bellevue Insurance Agency in 1977.

Cherek struck down the first suggestion - vice president, treasurer and secretary - because "that's a slew of titles and all it meant was that I was going to be doing all that work."

"I'm the organized one. I work much faster than my husband," she said. Hence, "Power Behind the Throne."

And Cherek's title is catching on.

"I've gone through 5,000 (business) cards," she said. "When I hand them out to people that come in, they say, 'Oh, I've got to show this to the guys or girls in the office.'"

"I end up giving two or three out at a time instead of one."

Consultants say that they've seen unusual titles increase with businesses' use of technology.

Paul Glen, principal of C2 Consulting in Marina Del Rey, Calif., recalls that during Apple Computer's early days in the early 1980s, one of its executives called himself an evangelist. His job: to recruit people to be enthusiastic about the company's line of Macintosh computers.

Through the 1980s and 1990s, as companies changed their organizational structure and incorporated technology, employees came up with new titles to differentiate their old job from the new one.

"The problem comes when people want to look like they're innovative but they're not," Glen said. "So, they'll come up with some goofy title to pretend that they're doing something new or something at all."

For example, "sales associate" instead of cashier.

Glen gave a few reasons for souped-up titles.

For one, a fancy title is something employers can give employees to appeal to their vanity, without cost. Another is that companies, especially during the technology bubble, wanted to flaunt their innovative style in every way except for profitability, Glen said.

Lastly, there's "just silly pomposity," Glen said.

Karen Friedman, a consultant who trains people to be better spokespeople, said the problem with vague, crazy or long titles is that no one gets them. And if people don't know what you do, they may not turn to you for business.

"A refinery control accounting manager - people don't understand that,"

said Friedman, who is president of Karen Friedman Enterprises of Blue Bell, Pa. "Solutions manager - what solutions do you provide? Are you going to provide the solution as to why my child couldn't get to sleep at 8 o'clock at night?"

On the other hand, Glen, the other consultant, said there are benefits to untraditional titles. One is "strategic ambiguity."

"Those with really long titles, where it's completely impossible to decipher, that's your advantage," he said. "You can sound impressive and mysterious without having to do anything."

Another advantage is a different label can help people frame their role.

"If you are genuinely doing something brand new, giving it a new name is one way of symbolizing that and forcing people to rethink about their role."

When Aaron Bilyeu got a job about a year ago at the Lund Co., an Omaha commercial real estate firm, he changed his job title from "Director of Development Management" to "Director of Vision Implementation."

If you can't guess what Bilyeu does, imagine how much more difficult it would have been if Bilyeu had stayed with his first choice, "Director of Vagary Actualization." That one was scratched because co-workers thought it was too vague.

Bilyeu is Lund's in-house architect, and more. Simply put, he helps businesses turn their vision into a building.

"It's combining real estate, architecture, finance, development and construction and wrapping all those things up to help people who don't understand the overall process," he said.

Bilyeu compared the trend toward creative job titles to a casual dress code.

"It's no longer that you have to be exactly this or exactly that," he said. "People are more about what they are doing than necessarily job titles. It's reflective of their style."

You can get a couple of clues to Kelly Muchemore's style by her title, "Director of Chaos" and from her work space at Berkshire Hathaway Inc.

Her office is crammed with knickknacks and posters, including a year-round Christmas tree and an embroidered needlepoint pillow of a hamburger that says: "If we are what we eat, then I'm fast, cheap and easy."

The title refers to Muchemore's job of planning the Berkshire Hathaway annual shareholder meeting, described by Muchemore as "mayhem." The meeting draws at least 10,000 people to Omaha.

Muchemore also designs the visitors' guide and lines up exhibitors for the meeting. She has three sets of business cards.

"One with no title, because we don't have titles here," she said. "Then, I got my Director of Chaos and then I got my Creative Director (title).

"The Director of Chaos is my favorite, of course."

"You don't have to be pencil-grinding, grimaced and all that. And Warren (Buffett, Berkshire chairman) has a fabulous sense of humor."

Muchemore gave herself the "Director of Chaos" title six years ago, after she had worked at Berkshire for two years.

"I try to see what I can get away with," she said, whispering. "Don't tell Warren."

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wrote:

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