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It would be easy to dismiss retitling as a silly exercise in euphemisms. But over the past decade London Business School professor Dan Cable has come to view it as a legitimate tool for improving workers' attitudes and boosting recruitment. "The traditional view of job titles is that they're about standardization and benchmarking," he says. "But titles often send the wrong signals and fail to attract the best applicants. Companies should recognize that they are powerful symbols of who we are, what we can do, and what others can expect from us."

Cable and two colleagues published a 2014 study on “self-reflective” job titles, and Cable has since expanded his work in the area. The paper took a deep dive into a local chapter of the Make-A-Wish Foundation, whose CEO invited employees to create fun titles to supplement their official ones. “Although we were skeptical in the beginning, our firsthand observations and in-depth interviews made us wonder whether there are real psychological benefits to retitling work,” Cable says. Employees described how their new and improved titles made their jobs more meaningful and helped them

cope with the emotional challenges of serving families with sick or dying children. The researchers concluded that the initiative reduced stress by helping people focus on the more purposeful aspects of their jobs.

To see if that dynamic would hold up in a full-fledged experiment, the researchers worked with employees at a hospital chain. With one group, they outlined how the retitling had improved life at Make-A-Wish and then asked the workers to suggest new titles for themselves. (An infectious disease specialist became a “germ slayer,” a nurse who gave lots of immunizations became a “quick shot,” an X-ray technician became a “bone seeker.”) The researchers surveyed the workers, along with members of two control groups, about their attitudes toward their work before the retitling and five weeks later. They found that those who had been asked to choose new titles had lower levels of emotional exhaustion, felt more validated and better recognized for their work, and experienced greater “psychological safety,” which can promote free information exchanges. They concluded, “Rather than viewing titles solely as sources and reflections of formality and rigidity or mechanisms of bureaucratic control, our research suggests that titles can be vehicles for agency, creativity, and coping.”

Cable has continued to explore how firms can benefit from retitling. At a large European brewery he tried a different approach: Instead of having each employee create a unique title, he asked workers who performed the same function to agree on a new title that everyone would share. A survey three months later showed that those employees were 16% more satisfied with their work and 11% more closely identified with the company than employees in a control group.

Cable has since created a methodology for companies looking to launch retitling initiatives. In step one, employees reflect on their job’s purpose (including who is served, who is affected by the quality of the work, and what value is created) and on questions of identity (including what aspects of the job the employee does particularly well or differently from other employees or competitors). In step two, employees brainstorm potential new titles, perhaps crowdsourcing ideas from other employees, and, with their manager’s input, decide on new ones. Much of the value of this activity lies not in the new titles but in the process that leads to them. “The exercise causes job incumbents to ask themselves, ‘What is the purpose of the work, and what is my unique connection to it?’” Cable says. “Most employees knew the answers to these questions at some point, but it is easy to forget them in the midst of day-to-day hassles.”

“It Gave Employees Ownership of Their Roles”



COURTESY OF PHILLIP KUCAB

A few years ago, when Susan Fenters Lerch, former CEO of the Make-A-Wish Foundation of Michigan, attended a seminar at the Disney Institute, she heard a discussion of how people’s titles influence their feelings

about their jobs. So when she returned to the office, she let her 31-person staff create their own titles to supplement the ones on the org chart. She recently described the process to HBR. Edited excerpts follow.

Why did you try self-created titles?

We faced challenging situations, working with

Some may be slow to warm to the idea. Laszlo Bock, Google’s SVP of “people operations,” was initially turned off by his novel title; among other concerns, the fact that it wasn’t clearly an HR job made him worry that it would be harder to find a new job if he left Google. But he’s grown to see the benefits, including that the title sounds less administrative and more strategic.

Retitling won’t work in every organization. The practice has been more common at start-ups and at dominant companies such as Disney and Google. Cable suggests that large companies try it with small units to gauge employee reactions. For those that want to experiment with retitling, there’s another significant benefit: Unlike many HR initiatives, this one costs almost nothing. Says Cable: “Rebranding job titles around the ‘why of work,’ unique

families whose children had serious health issues. I was looking to do something fun that would give employees a sense of control. People kept their traditional titles, but everyone created an additional, fun title. I became “the fairy godmother.” Our finance director became “the minister of dollars and sense.” The office manager became “the keeper of keys,” from Harry Potter. I used both titles on business cards and in e-mail—I put the supplemental title in italics.

What did it accomplish?

Creating new titles gave people a way to describe how they felt about the job. It gave them ownership of their role. The new titles often became a conversation starter with external people—they’d ask about it, and it created an opening to explain what you do.

What if someone couldn’t come up with something clever?

We’d sit down, talk about it, play around with words together. Most people came up with things they felt really good about.

I’m not sure how this would go over in my workplace.


For it to work well, the leader has to be comfortable with it, and it has to make sense for the organization. It could be challenging in a large one, where many people have the same title. It’s probably better suited to a smaller, less traditional organization.

cultural traits, and employees’ personal identities can have important effects on how outsiders respond to the jobs and how people in the jobs see themselves.”

About the Research: “[Job Titles as Identity Badges: How Self-Reflective Titles Can Reduce Emotional Exhaustion](#),” by Adam M. Grant, Justin M. Berg, and Daniel M. Cable (Academy of Management Journal, 2014)

A version of this article appeared in the May 2016 issue (pp.24–25) of *Harvard Business Review*.

This article is about MOTIVATING PEOPLE

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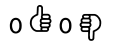
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