

Make a Name for Yourself

By

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In this era of downsizing, "uptitling" is on the rise. David Wilson explains.

So you want a pay rise - you believe you have earned it. Although sympathetic, your boss has a better idea.

Instead of money, you will get an inspiring boost to your pride in the shape of a remodelled, fancy job title.

Welcome to the exalted realm of "uptitling", aka "title inflation". Within its suspect sphere, nobody is just a glum clerk or drone. Everyone becomes somebody special with a turbocharged or technocratic title, as in the film *Up in the Air*, in which George Clooney plays a "transition specialist" (hatchet man) who roams the US suavely axing unfortunates.

In real life - for example, "upselling" (pushing inflated products on shoppers) - uptitling provokes scorn. "The use of uptitling instead of a pay rise is ridiculous," recruitment consultant Michael Dimopoulos says. Offering a new job title instead of tangible benefits for the same role will fail to motivate staff, he adds. "If you recognise great work and contribution, then reward and promote them accordingly."

Organisational psychologist Christopher Shen echoes Dimopoulos. He says uptitling is counterproductive - it erodes satisfaction and engagement.

Worse, uptitling, which thrives during a downturn, is belittling. Managers uptitle staff they disdain. Female staff, in particular, are singled out for inflated titles instead of pay rises or promotions.

At first, an inflated title may boost self-esteem and make you feel like a corporate rock star, so employees embrace uptitling, Shen says.

Over time, however, he warns, the buzzword bingo insincerity dawns. You start asking whether the title is a compliment or an insult to your intelligence and feel fobbed off, fooled, even aggrieved. Resentment sets in.

Still, uptitling brings benefits of a kind. For a start, it can lessen the stigma attached to a role or mask its banality, conferring cachet without added burden.

What is more, if a newly concocted aristocratic title looks cool on your business card, it may boost your credibility and networking prospects. Better yet, it may add grunt to your CV when it comes to moving on.

Business book writer BJ Gallagher defends uptitling, which she calls "psychic pay", and casts it as smart compensation rather than an exercise in pomposity.

"Human beings, like other social animals, are acutely status-conscious," she says. "Where you stand in the pecking order is important on so many levels, affecting your earning ability, your mate selection, your health, your children's future and much more.

"Just as birds and animals preen, strut and puff themselves up to look as impressive as they can, so do humans. It's natural, normal and good for the species."

Banks have been uptitling for decades, she says, and points to their number of vice-presidents.

The practice of applying presidential titles to ordinary staff dates back to the 1970s, when high fiscal inflation, wage claims and pay disputes spurred bosses to devise a

tactful appeasement ploy. It caught on and refused to die, foreshadowing a wider trend towards linguistic deception, which has come under fire from a battalion of analysts.

First came How Mumbo-jumbo Conquered the World by British journalist Francis Wheen. In its wake came On Bullshit by Harry Frankfurt, an Ivy League philosophy professor firmly planted in what he called the "reality-based community".

Frankfurt claimed claptrap had made unprecedented strides, with the result that people could no longer tell truth from spin and hype - a point pursued by US analyst Barbara Ehrenreich in her diatribe Smile or Die.

Still, if it is true that - as the saying goes - you are what you have the nerve to claim to be, a diva label with little grounding in reality just might boost your cause. Given the rocky economic climate, it may even be your best option - preferable to being downsized. Just.

THE WORLD'S MOST PRETENTIOUS JOB TITLES

Director of first impressions Receptionist

Client liaison officer Call centre operator

Senior corporate events and seminars manager Secretary

Horticultural maintenance officer Gardener

Garbologist Dustman

Manager, people and culture HR

Remuneration and classification administrator Payroll clerk

Office refreshment co-ordinator Tea boy

Retail assistant Shopkeeper

Information retrieval specialist Librarian

Revenue protection officer Ticket inspector

Flueologist Chimney sweep

Knowledge navigator Teacher

Sanitation assistant Loo cleaner

Mixologist Bartender

Environmental services engineer Cleaner

Stock replenishment adviser Shelf-stacker

Vision clearance executive Window cleaner (voted the stupidest job title of all time).

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Based in Melbourne, Australia, Christopher Shen Consulting brings organisational psychology solutions to workplaces, helping people become stronger leaders and teams become better performers.

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