

# Conscious Careering

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## The Gates Foundation; what we can learn from the "Holy Grail" of the Puget Sound job market!

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Admit it. You've daydreamed about working for the Gates Foundation, haven't you?

Throughout the entire first decade I spent coaching job hunters here in the Puget Sound area, the hottest companies to work for were always Microsoft, Starbucks, REI, and the like. Over the past two years, however, these proud organizations have become relegated to a second-tier role, as the Gates Foundation has rocketed to the top of almost every job seeker's wish list in record time. In fact, whether I'm working with accountants, admin assistants, or senior executives, I'd estimate that the Gates Foundation is cited as the top employer of choice by at least 80% of my client base.

Here's the twist, however. This article is not actually going to be about what it's like working at the Gates Foundation—or whether they deserve their current standing as the Holy Grail of the Puget Sound job seeker community. I don't actually know anybody who works at the organization, first of all, and I'm also not in a place to confirm or deny any of the great many rumors I've heard about what the experience of working for the Gates Foundation is really like. I'm more concerned, instead, with using these column inches to discuss the specific *reasons* so many folks select the Foundation as their number-one choice—and what I feel this reveals about both our culture as well as about the nature of career choices, in general.

For starters, let me share how the dialogue tends to go when my clients bring up the G-word in my office. Me: "So where would you ideally like to work?" Them: "I'm pretty open, but I guess my dream assignment would be a job with The Gates Foundation." Me: "Interesting. Why is that?" Them: "Because at this point in my career, I'd really like to give something back and make a difference." Me: "Oh, good to know! Then we should definitely start sending your resume out to the hundreds of non-profits here in the area where you could get involved in some really meaningful work." Them: "Umm, well, I'm not really sure I'd be interested in those other places." Me: "Oh? Why is that?" Them: "Gosh, I'm not really sure, now that you mention it..."

And from there, the conversation usually drifts into a few moments of awkward silence.

The point I'm trying to illustrate here is that an enormously large percentage of the workforce, particularly the Baby Boomers, are starting to "turn the corner" and search for increased significance in how they invest the days they have left prior to retirement. This is no doubt a function of age demographics, but also reflects (in my opinion) the collective spike in societal maturity we've all experienced following the 9/11 tragedy. And yet, after participating in numerous conversations such as the one outlined previously, I still can't shake the sense that most people suffer from some fairly shallow thinking in terms of how serious they are about reaching these goals.

Case in point? I think the near-unanimous targeting of the Gates Foundation, while due in part to the tremendous amount of PR this organization receives, is also largely owing to the fact that the word "Gates" happens to be part of the company name—and that word, in this town, is synonymous with "money". My belief is that people are drawn to the organization, consciously or subconsciously, because they feel that working for the Gates Foundation would allow them to perform meaningful work without having to suffer the indignities or privations of a significant pay cut. Whether or not this may actually be true seems beside the point, because when questioned, most people (myself included) don't know whether the Foundation pays any more than, let's say, World Vision or United Way. But again, time and time again, the name of this particular organization comes up when the names of other philanthropic institutions don't—and there's got to be a reason for it.

Perhaps I'm totally off-base in this perception, but frankly, the "no salary cut" factor is the only hypothesis I've been able to come up with to explain this recurring phenomenon. And again, if anything, I think it signals we may be on the forefront of an exciting revolution—and that people might be more willing to re-examine their careers these days as a conduit for their passions and personal values, instead of solely as an economic vehicle.

Are you one of these folks? If so, good for you, and I'm sure there are many organizations out there waiting to apply your talents on behalf of a worthy constituency. Just keep in mind that your search should ideally be focused around a plural set of targets, not just a single one. After all, the Gates Foundation may be a great place to work, but they receive (by all accounts) over 1,000 resumes for every job they advertise!

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