

BUSINESS BUZZWORD BINGO

Rightsizing bizspeak proactively

Are you a person who likes to use the latest business jargon or not?

Or, to put it another way, are you an on-plan mission-focused team player with the right headset for the post-bubble business environment or simply a person trying to do a good job in today's buzzword-ridden world?

Yes, bizspeak is amusing and can be a lot of fun. It can even be useful as a form of shorthand, but it is also dangerous.

I was prompted to write this article when I came across an old notebook that I used in the mid 1980's. At the time I reported to someone who used jargon so liberally that I often had no idea what he was talking about. For my amusement I used to record what he said in the back of this notebook. Reading through it again I expected to have a good chuckle, but found to my surprise, that all of the words and phrases that I found so amusing then, now seem ordinary. Phrases such as "mission critical", "mindset change" and "stake in the ground" have all managed to find their way into the everyday vernacular of business.

While these examples are rather obvious forms of jargon, some are more subtle, such as the use of "contact" as a verb. Indeed, back in 1931, a Western Union vice president called the verb "a hideous vulgarism" and banned it from company documents.

But why is bizspeak dangerous?

The problem is that clarity in communication is a vital ingredient in business. If we confuse our audience by using terms that have no dictionary definition, how can we be sure that we have put across our wishes successfully? Worse still, if we use terms that people do not understand, it is likely that they will switch off completely.

For example, I well remember a speech given by the then President of Unisys in which he uttered the immortal words "Unisys is not an oxymoron". Apart from causing a one-day surge in dictionary sales, the only benefit derived from the speech was that vastly more people now know what "oxymoron" means, the rest of his speech being instantly forgotten.

It is dangerous to assume that because we speak the same language, we will be understood. In the same way that George Bernard Shaw observed that "Britain and America are nations divided by a common language", so the relentless increase in the use of buzzwords is creating differences in understanding between those who use them and those who listen.

An article in the New York Times in August 2003 pointed out that business has now managed to overtake even government bureaucracy in the public mind as the chief perpetrator of doublespeak. On the Web, references to corporate or business jargon outnumber references to bureaucratic or government jargon by 3 to 1. This is a remarkable shift in attitudes, particularly since government hasn't exactly been sleeping on the job.

So what can we do about it?

The first thing is to listen – really listen. Listen to understand, not simply to hear. Don't allow yourself to be hoodwinked into thinking you understand when in actual fact you don't and, when you don't understand, ask for clarification. Alternatively, you can visit the amusing BizzWhack web site at www.bizzwhack.com, which is dedicated to de-mystifying buzzwords and where you will find a useful buzzword dictionary.

The second thing you can do is to make sure that you don't inadvertently use buzzwords yourself. To

assist you in this task you might like to visit the Deloitte Consulting website at www.deloitte.com/us/bullfighter where you can download a free program called "Bullfighter". This programme searches documents for jargon and unnecessarily complex language. Once installed, the Bullfighter toolbar appears in Microsoft Word and PowerPoint documents, and works much like the spell check feature. The software scans documents for buzzwords, flogs the author for trying to use those words, suggests replacements, and then assigns a Bull Composite score.

Interestingly, using the tool to examine a wide range of communications from companies in the Dow Jones Industrial Average, Deloitte found that straight-talking companies generally outperform companies that use vague, unclear communications.

You might also like to visit the Plain English Campaign's web site at www.plainenglish.co.uk where you can download a number of free guides including an A-Z of alternative words.

The final thing to do is to undermine the validity of buzzwords. Laugh out loud and ask what the word or phrase means. In my own company, to help combat bizspeak we play "Business Buzzword Bingo".

The idea came from a Scott Adams cartoon in which Dilbert is given a "buzzword bingo" card on his way into a meeting and told; "If the boss uses a buzzword on the card, you check it off. The objective is to fill a row". No sooner has his boss begun to speak than Dilbert shouts "bingo!".

We encourage students to play the game on our courses. It adds a bit of fun and ensures that our presenters and course leaders communicate clearly. To print our your own Business Buzzword Bingo cards, visit www.extensor.co.uk.



While the use of buzzwords creates the illusion of understanding for those who use them, they generally achieve just opposite for those on the receiving end. I therefore hope you will join me, and the growing number of "buzzwhackers", in fighting the relentless rise of the buzzword.

This article first appeared in the July edition of HR Business

About the author: Alistair Schofield is Managing Director of Extensor Limited and can be contacted at as@extensor.co.uk or via the company web site – www.extensor.co.uk.

Postscript

Since writing this article this article I was alerted by a reader to the following example of incomprehensible gobbledegook that appears as an advertisement for a company called Blueprint Management Systems in the Times Online business directory:

"Blueprint is an all-round Business Intelligence Solutions provider. Solutions include packaged warehouse / analytic solutions for specific business departments, automated report distribution, building & designing of data marts & warehouses and monitoring of enterprise performance with dashboards & scorecards."

I don't know about you but I have no idea what they do. The only clue I can offer is that the advertisement appeared in the training section!

Having run this through Deloitte's Bullfighter product, it gave the following diagnosis:

You overwhelmingly embrace obfuscation and don't want the reader to understand anything you have to say. Your writing lavishes a preponderance of dependent clauses and compound negatives upon the reader, whose cognitive load not infrequently exceeds the purported benefit of the substance of the article. Syntax incorporates numerous collections of items juxtaposed or in series that demand persistence and not a little unqualified expertise on the part of all intended recipients of the author's communications. In fact, such machinations inevitably prove detrimental to comprehension and sabotage the imparting of any and all knowledge. Your condition is irreversible.