JARGON UNCHAINED

Business is ruining the English language

Len Guff

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"To write or even speak English is not a science but an art. There are no reliable words. Whoever writes English is involved in a struggle that never lets up even for a sentence. He is struggling against vagueness, against obscurity, against the lure of the decorative adjective, against the encroachment of Latin and Greek, and, above all, against the worn-out phrases and dead metaphors with which the language is cluttered up." - George Orwell (1903 - 1950)

Jargon Unchained comprises some of the worst terms in business speak today. If you know of worse examples, good. Write a book about them. This stuff shouldn't be left unchecked. The situation is only going to deteriorate.

Thanks to Dave Whittle for the front cover (http://davidwhittle.tumblr.com/), and to DD, JS and RK for the subbing and the kind words.

I dedicate this to anyone who's never used the phrase 'blue sky thinking'.

Len

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Introduction

A quick heads-up: this book will annoy you. It will annoy you because you'll disagree with some of the words and phrases that have been deemed 'jargon'. It will annoy you because you'll see yourself in some of the scenarios and think, 'I talk like that.' But it will mainly annoy you because you'll recognise, hopefully, how meaningless so much of it is, how businesses use and abuse the English language to obfuscate true meaning, how we hide behind mixed metaphors and neologisms. For starters, the first sentence of this paragraph contains a term that would have been derided for being jargon not that long ago.

The first time I heard the term 'heads-up' (hyphenated or not, just as bad) was 2003, and I was writing code scripts for a large telecoms company. I remember laughing to my colleague about how silly it sounded. As if you need to look up to pay attention anyway. Now, midway through the second decade of the 21st century, it's acceptable English. This is a theme that will be returned to again: the idea of change, and that the English language is alive, malleable and constantly redefining itself - as it should be.

To do this properly I needed to find out the history of the various terms included, and what better way to do so than with Google Scholar. A free tool often used in citations for degrees and vivas, Google Scholar offered up (in most cases) the first recorded usage of a specific term and for the purposes of this short book performed the task admirably. In most cases these terms have been around much longer than you think, leading me to doubt my original assertion as to whether they could and would be classed as business jargon any longer. But for the context of this book only I could make that judgment, and no doubt many will disagree.

Jargon's existence is a by-product of the global explosion of admin

work, and to help explain this existence, it also makes sense to provide a definition. I'm defining business jargon as **the needless complication of the English language by mid-level managers seeking to overintellectualise their existence**.

Jargon is spoken natively by The Jargonista. Natural habitat: The office. As companies have increased workforce numbers but not their tangible 'product set', their people have been forced into management jobs they don't really want to do, and sought ways of differentiating themselves from their similarly hamstrung colleagues. As Jargonistas canâ€™t actually make a difference, they do this by sounding like they are making a difference. And how do they do that? By rechristening existing business processes with flashy new names. They have personalised and claimed ownership of the generic admin experience.

Warning signs

- Metaphors out of control
- Nouns as verbs
- Overcomplicating sentences
- Needless extra words added on

You'd think that the propensity for turning everything into verbs indicates some kind of increase in activity compared with the board meeting lethargy of our forebears, but in fact the opposite is true. The old adage is that we are defined by our actions and not words, but not so in the boardroom. Careers are built and influence consolidated by sitting around doing nothing other than talking the right language - one that means very little.

I would say 'enjoy', but instead I offer my sympathies.