WHY JARGON WON'T JIVE: WHY WHAT YOU SAY AFFECTS WHAT YOU SELL

> *"Hi, I'm looking for a WFM scheduling tool. What do you offer?"*

> *"We have a scalable full-service system that provides an end-to-end solution."*

"Great! We are a global business. Does your product support this type of business structure?"

"Hmm, synergy. That sounds good. So what makes you and your product better than others?"

"I'm not sure what you mean by base level…Do you think our business is simple? What can I expect from the implementation process?"

"Synchronized system alignment sounds fancy. And we do worry – we are investing a lot into this system."

"Well, I want to do what's best for my company, although I'm still not sure if we need a paradigm shift."

"We have great synergy with clients working on global imperatives."

"We are on the bleeding edge of innovative solutions. But at a base level, it comes down to our parallel policy options."

"Our interdependent parts and pieces will integrate seamlessly into your current infrastructure. We also ensure synchronized system alignment, so you won't have to worry about a thing!"

"It's all a part of system optimization. We're certain you can save money when you harmonize things. You are a forward-thinking person. Think of how this technology will completely shift the paradigm in your organization."

"Listen, we believe in interactive incremental flexibility. Take some time to consider the potential, and then we can touch base later."

LANGUAGE: THE LOST ART

All comedy aside, we see here how jargon hurts our ability to communicate effectively. Whether it sounds catchy or cliché, jargon contorts our true meaning. Although our counterparts and co-workers might also speak the common corporate tongue, we cannot allow quick convenience or the urge to impress overpower the authenticity of our real message.

WORDS MATTER

WAM-Pros may be the stewards of workforce management technology, but they aren't always working with systems and machines. WFM technology is designed to benefit and manage *people*. Therefore, WAM-Pros need to be able to communicate with people effectively.

In this paper, we discuss the power of words and the problem with jargon. We do not want to clutter our speech with unnecessary terms and meanings for the same reason we don't want to clutter our systems with unnecessary programming or data. Clutter compromises critical functionality, distorts the intended use, or may cause a loss of performance.

By the end of this paper you should not only know *why* to avoid excessive jargon, but you should also know which language to use instead.

A sale depends on the relationship between buyer and seller, and the relationship depends on conversations between the buyer and seller. Sellers make promises to provide, buyers make promises to purchase. Buyers talk about their problems and sellers talk about their products. The conversation itself should be simple, but when we start replacing clear terms with jargon and injecting complex verbiage, we not only lose the meaning of our words, we might even confuse the buyer or lose the deal.

JOINING THE IN-GROUP

Some might say that it's time for us to open the kimono: We know that the ubiquity of jargon is a problem, yet we continue to use it. Why we do depends on several factors:

- The relationship between the speakers
- A speaker's perceived status (both internally and externally)
- The particular circumstance
- The topic of conversation

We often use jargon to quickly wrap up a conversation, fill an awkward silence, or condense our pitch. We believe that big words boost our intelligence or cover up our lack thereof. We add jargon and complex speech to distinguish our level of knowledge, specific social class, or particular profession. Bernard Spolsky, a respected sociolinguistic researcher and writer, explained the use of jargon like this:

> "A specialized jargon serves not just to label new and needed concepts, but to establish bonds between members of the in-group and enforce boundaries for outsiders. If you cannot understand my jargon, you don't belong in my group."[i]

...sms, and many other linguistic terms we have not likely heard since ...erentiate *our* daily speech from others'. We expect those in our group to understand what we mean. Repeatedly explaining the full meaning of our jargon terms would be tiresome. We live in a world of 140 character blurbs, instant messaging, memes, and viral videos. Perhaps using jargon is just the way we have made our conversations more instantaneous. However, as we see in Spolsky's assessment, jargon does not just clarify our communication or save us talking time; it is the inside joke of language—the exclusive, context-driven, and unpredictable meaning of what we say. We aren't cool unless we know and use these terms.

MASKED MEANINGS

The ubiquity of legalese and the fear of being sued have also contributed to the jargon epidemic. "Anything you say can and will be used against you" is now a mantra not only repeated by law enforcement, but also by anyone involved in a contract negotiation. In these cases, it might be preferable to mask our true meaning. Leaving terms open to interpretation might protect us from punishment, but it certainly won't improve our understanding.

Sometimes we introduce jargon because there is no other word for what we mean—or so we think. Creating a new term helps us avoid confusing an existing denotation with a new one. For example, the German word *klage* could mean both a charge (lawsuit) and a complaint (lament). These are two very different courses of action. To eliminate this ambiguity, German lawyers could either agree on a certain definition for the term, or create a separate term (jargon) for what they mean. Similar logic often applies when we derive words from other languages, or supplement our native tongue with a foreign word not yet in our dictionary.

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We also turn to jargon when confused or unsure. We dress up our lack of knowledge with loose-fitting metaphors and industry-only terminology. We chatter above, around, or otherwise away from the actual topic, creating word traffic to slow the listener down as they work to process the meaning. "Okay, he said we need to leverage our position as a value-added service before we can make this a reciprocal juncture...what's our value-add again?" Similarly, if we are in an uncomfortable situation where we feel unprepared or insecure, we use jargon to bedazzle our audience. The words may be muddled or downright meaningless, but we are still saying something. "Wow, I had no idea what she was talking about, but she assured me that she followed best practice." Sadly, by using jargon we lose the beauty of the English language: its direct and explicit meaning. Jargon turns true meaning into cryptic code, leaving us with watered-down word waste.

KEEPING IT REAL IN WORKFORCE MANAGEMENT

Words carry several meanings, both literal and implied. Combining those words to form a phrase adds another layer of meaning, and after we recognize and process the denotations and connotations, we create an expectation. Some words are teasers—they lead you on to believe or expect something that may or may not be correct. Herein lies the problem: jargon creates a temporary fix for lingual laziness, but it also sets us up with false hopes and high expectations.

Let's imagine that Rachel, a Workforce Management Director, wants to purchase a new mobile schedule management technology. As she skims through endless info pages describing the particular products, features, and functionality, she reads many seductive and enticing words and phrases.

"Sleek, intuitive, end-to-end design."

"Our services are based on industry best practices."

"Leverage our technology to shift the paradigm in your organization."

"Get in the fast lane with our full service product."

Earlier, we explained how jargon can distinguish or introduce something novel, but these terms could describe anything from a kitchen floor plan to a car wash. Rachel's expectation of "intuitive" or "a paradigm shift" could be completely different from what the seller truly offers. Rachel might not only have a hard time *distinguishing* one product from another, she might not even be able to define what the product actually *does*. If your buyers cannot identify what your product is or does, this isn't just a simple misunderstanding—this is a disconnect leading to a lack of trust.

You are probably hoping we will now talk about vendor selection best practices. We won't. Not only because the jargon phrase "best practices" is meant to put you at ease without explicitly telling you anything, but because in reality, vendor and product selection depends on specific needs. If only we had a sleek, intuitive, end-to-end design for vendor selection! Unfortunately, there is no one right way to select a vendor or buy a product.

Tackling a buyer's specific needs is not only challenging, it can also feel limiting. Sellers might think using specific language for a target audience precludes their product from other potential buyers. However, vague terms and claims do not make the sale easier for neither buyer nor seller. If Rachel cannot identify the true offering, she might never buy it. If the seller implies something through loose terms, Rachel will drop the sale once she realizes that she won't get what she expected. And, if Rachel does go through with the purchase, she may become the unhappy owner of an incompatible system. When we break down complex ideas into simple language, more people can understand the idea. When more people understand the idea, more people believe the terms or buy the product. Using direct and explicit language provides more accurate descriptions, clearer expectations, and more action.

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Additionally, jargon can have the ill-effect of adding an arrogant tone to our speech. It sounds impersonal, like canned rhetoric. When we use jargon, we talk indirectly; it makes us sound disinterested and the conversation shallow. "We will touch base later," or "Let's put that issue on the

back-burner for now," or "We want to make sure we have the right synergy" might suggest to Rachel that she is not a valued or respected partner, or that the seller isn't ready to make a real commitment. She might think, "Is this person even really thinking about me or my needs?" If Rachel discusses these feelings with others, it can turn into a bad industry reputation. Many buyer-seller relationships in workforce management rely on references and reviews, and a bad reputation travels faster than a good one. If we want a real, direct conversation, we need to use real, direct language.

QUITTING OUR ABUSE OF JARGON

Just like trying to quit many addictive and subconscious habits, stopping our use of jargon will be challenging. To ease the detox, let's look at options and alternatives for the jargon phrases we love to hate. These plain and simple substitutes will have you back to basic, beautiful English in no time.

Jargon Term	Plain English Alternative
Best practice	Name the specific method that will bring the desired or best results (use specific examples and explain your methods)
Buy-in	Commitment or agreement
Core competency	Unique ability Distinctive trait, attribute, or capability
Deliverable	Use specific names of items, tasks, or results and define the date you want them, if they need to be approved, etc.
Full-service or end-to-end	Explain all the services you offer (e.g., "we do everything from webhosting, to content management, to web development")
Incentivize	Motivate, encourage
Leverage	Make use of something Use something to your advantage Benefit from Build upon
Loop back, circle back	Talk/meet later, reconnect
Move the needle	Get a reaction Make a positive change or noticeable difference
Open the kimono	Reveal certain information
Paradigm (or paradigm shift)	New structure, model, pattern An alternate point of view
Ping	Talk, discuss, speak, remind

Put on the back-burner Take it off-line	Let's talk about this later Let's remove this from the urgent list
Run through the tape	Finish or complete the quarter
Reach out	Talk, call, email, write, fax, phone
Synergy	Cooperation, fit, collaboration
Touch base	Talk, call, email, write, fax, phone + a specific date and time
Utilize	To make something useful (Although most of the time the writer could supplement with the term: "use")
Value-added service	Something that will fix your problem (specifically X), offers a new opportunity (such as Y), etc.

CONCLUSION

Some phrases we hate to see demoted to the jargon category. *Window of opportunity,* for example, could be a poetic metaphor, yet its trite use and lack of context in day-to-day speech make it less effective. Instead of inciting imagination, these overused or misused phrases turn into clichés. Some of the most common clichés and jargon are just misunderstood or inappropriately applied metaphors. Unfortunately, we don't know how or when to effectively use them, and so they lose their expressive power.

The English language has so many words available that it can be tempting to use the less common ones to differentiate ourselves or our products. However, let's not reach for overly complex words or phrases with an unexpected or embellished meaning simply for variety's sake. If we must use jargon, we should use it sparingly and appropriately. There may be jargon specific to your industry, your profession, or even your office you that you need to use at certain times, but be selective. Use jargon to enrich, not cheapen, what you say and what you sell. Win customers and good deals with a clear message and concise delivery.

"It follows that any struggle against the abuse of language is a sentimental archaism, like preferring candles to electric light or hansom cabs to aeroplanes."

George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language." *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays*. Secker and Warburg: London. 1950.

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Why is jargon sometimes used instead of familiar words?

https://linguistics.stackexchange.com/questions/3973/why-is-jargon-sometimes-used-instead-of-familiar-words

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[i] Spolsky, B. *Sociolinguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (1998). pp. 31-35.