

## The hidden consequences of using jargon

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- Jargon can potentially confuse, annoy or erode trust.
  - This article examines the three reasons why we use jargon and three potential consequences.
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Jargon is all around us. Everyone is moving the needle, pivoting and thinking outside the square. Ironically the term thinking outside the square was first used in the 1970s, so if you are still using this metaphor, perhaps you are not demonstrating the innovative and creative thinking qualities you are looking for in others. As there are hidden consequences to using jargon, let's look at the three reason why we use jargon and the potential consequences.

### **Avoidance**

Sometimes people default to jargon when they have something to hide. We often see this when companies refer to cutting jobs (that is, making people unemployed) as 'downsizing' or 'rightsizing'. In December 2018, General Motors took this to a whole new level when they referred to the closure of five plants in the United States and Canada — with a loss of up to 14,000 jobs — as being unallocated — instead of saying words like 'sack', 'closure' or 'job losses', they referred to these factories and people as 'unallocated'.

## Importance

Some of us use jargon for importance. We use it to make us sound more credible or knowledgeable than what we are. Sometimes you feel like people are just talking in clichés such as ‘value-add team player’ or ‘design-led philosophy with a customer centric focus’.

You see no greater example of this than the increasing number of job titles that make even the most boring jobs sound thrilling. For example, *Galactic Viceroy of Research Excellence at Microsoft*: This was assigned to someone who did cloud-related research. Job interviews can be another situation where jargon is also used to sound important.

## Acceptance

Finally, and perhaps the most common reason why we use jargon, is acceptance. One of our greatest desires as humans is to be connected to each other and accepted, often at any cost. We act in a certain way to fit in. We dress in a certain way to fit in. We talk in a certain way to fit in. All it takes is a senior person or an external consultant to start using a particular phrase and, in most cases, gradually everyone else starts to use it.

If we start a new job and everyone is pivoting around their robust and sustainable customer centric strategy, it does not take long before we start using those words ourselves. Regardless of why we use jargon, there are consequences.



...when we overuse jargon, people trust us less and doubt our intentions

## Consequence 1: Lack of trust

Believe it or not, research does show that using jargon and clichés can make us appear more credible (at least at first, and only in certain forums).

At the University of Munster, Germany, Dr Regina Jucks and Maria Zimmermann published ‘How experts’ use of medical technical jargon in different types of online health forums affects perceived information credibility: Randomised experiment with laypersons’.

The results showed that using high amounts of jargon when talking to other medical experts resulted in higher credibility than using less jargon in these forums. Conversely the opposite was true. For the layperson, using low amounts of jargon resulted in higher credibility than using high amounts of jargon. However, in both situations, the more jargon was used the less it was perceived as trustworthy.

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Another study at the New York University concluded that there was a lower level of trust when vague words were used (such as, 'An apology would be needed if my words have caused offence') and a higher level when more concrete words were used (such as, 'I am sorry').

We tend to use jargon when we want to avoid something but, ironically, the more you use jargon, the more people think you are just flat out lying. So, when we overuse jargon, people trust us less and doubt our intentions.

## Consequence 2: Miscommunication

As well as lack of trust, overuse of jargon can mean people disconnect from your message, feel isolated and ultimately lead to miscommunication. If everyone understands the jargon, then it can be a very efficient way of communicating. But beware, just because people are saying 'move the needle', does not mean they understand the phrase. What's more, their interpretation may be different to yours.

In 2014, Richard Branson wrote a LinkedIn article titled 'Why you should do away with jargon'. His opening paragraph read,

*Some people love speaking in jargon, using fancy words and turning everything into acronyms. Personally, I find this simply slows things down, confuses people and causes them to lose interest. It's far better to use a simple term and commonplace words that everyone will understand, rather than showing off and annoying your audience.*

In summary, unless you are positive everyone understands the jargon term you are using, you are potentially confusing them, annoying them or losing their trust. As George Orwell advised, 'Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent'.

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