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# Sasha Borissenko: Cutting through the workplace lingo



Opinion by

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Phrases like "pivot," "agile," and "flex" take the cake and have been popularised as a result of Covid-19, writes Sasha Borissenko. Photo / 123RF

**OPINION:**

The law can be inaccessible to many in a financial sense, but also linguistically speaking. The law is rooted in hundreds of years of history and it's been exclusively accessible to the upper echelons of most societies.

Now, if law was accessible to all, then arguably there'd be no need for lawyers. Ipso facto, the more out of reach something is or appears to be, the less inclined people might be to question it.

Let's "pivot" this thinking more broadly to include businesses and the public sector. Submissions closed in March for the Plain Language Bill, which aims to improve the effectiveness and accountability of the public service by requiring communications to be clear and accessible to the public. How apropos!

Business jargon is now the plat-du-jour. On one hand it's so mind-boggling you have to either fake it "till you make it" and the "mental gymnastics" required means you're less inclined to fall into a bureaucratic slumber. On the other hand, the undue use of jargon and corporate slang of everyday speech from those in power puts a further strain on the workforce.

Nevertheless, thanks to crowdsourcing via Facebook, here's an exhaustive list of corporate phrases that are mandatory if you want to thrive in the corporate world.

Let's start with salutations. They set the scene and can give you an indication of the type of people and workplace culture you're dealing with. Any email that addresses other professionals as "ladies" or "lads" should be criminalised.

The patronising all-too-familiar tone suggests the workplace is rife with sexism, and women will no doubt be paid less than or not as valued as their male counterparts.

Buyers also beware of the incorrect use of te reo Māori. If you see a "kia ora" with a capital O, or a mōrena without a macron, the said manager has no real appreciation of the language.

Expect political correctness in all marketing material so that said company profits from virtue signalling. This red flag could also be masking racist undertones and people of colour will no doubt be paid less and underrepresented - dispute any diversity policy on offer.

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"Weasel words" are phrases that allow a boss or employee to say one thing while meaning the opposite. These traditionally include: "your comments will be held in strict confidence," "voluntary participation," "we encourage work-life balance," "we are an equal opportunity employer," and "this is a development opportunity".

The likes of "I'm sorry if I've offended you," "I'm sorry you feel that way," "that being said," "my hands are tied," or "with all due respect" - means no, I'm not sorry at all. This is how things are going to go and there's nothing you can do about it.

The use of "my" as in "my team will get back to you" translates to "I am in authority, I don't value those beneath me in the hierarchical structure, and while my ego is big, it's incredibly fragile".

"Key takeaways," "landing," "learnings," "going forward," "action-items" or the use of "next steps" are terms used to describe conclusions arising from superfluous meetings where you could otherwise be doing actual work. No, we're not talking about an airport, fish and chips on a Friday, education, or walking off a cliff.

"Space" is currently in vogue to describe an area or piece of work. This word appears to be used after many nouns, adding length to sentences and meetings, and should only be used by architects or astronomers.

"Outcomes," "deliverables," or "meeting stakeholder expectations" are fancy words to describe work that needs to be completed, on demand.

"Top level," taking a "strategic or helicopter view," "blue sky thinking," or "next level thinking": involves making plans that could be incredibly important for an organisation but there will never be the budget or enthusiasm to commence or complete.

To "unpack," "dissect," or "drill down" (an idea) is a euphemism for: No, I haven't actually thought about what you said so let's "park this"/"circle back"/"touch base" (to reconvene) when I can be arsed.

To "reach" or put your "feelers out" doesn't involve unwarranted physical touching, rather, it's the process of talking to people. Likewise, "desktop research" is business-talk for research completed via a computer.

"Hot-desking" is a term used for a place where you physically work. It's hot because you may be sharing it with someone else and it serves as a reminder that you're not valued.

For me, "pivot," "agile," and "flex" take the cake and have been popularised as a result of Covid-19. They're used to describe changes made because the proverbial has hit the fan.

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I still don't know what "synergy" means and any acronyms - BAU (Business As Usual), WIP (Work In Progress), COB (Close Of Business), CTA (Call To Action), LOL (Laugh Out Loud) et al - should be reserved only for Generation Z.

"Moving forward," while it's all fun and games to try and be a "team player" and get "on board" with the lingo, if language is used to define the pecking order it's a hard no from me.