

BUSINESS PROCESS MANAGEMENT

Jargon and shades of grey

Is terminology an aid to learning or a language barrier. David Winders finds himself the centre of a culture clash.



I was delivering one of my workshops on business architecture last month and some of the delegates on the course who were

from a training organisation wanted to understand what business architecture was all about. In being new to the subject they had issues with some of the terms and acronyms that I and other delegates with a business change background were using. They were coming from a purist point of view with the argument that jargon is completely bad and should be avoided and indeed actively discouraged at all times. This is not an unusual view and is upheld by many people; however this got me thinking and I believe it is not such a black and white issue.

Jargon is described in the dictionary as “specialised language of a profession, culture or subject” and further entries describe it in more pejorative terms as language characterised by pretentious syntax or gibberish.

Many subjects are described by a set of terms that have particular

meaning to those involved in the subject and this facilitates the pursuit and development of the discipline. If we remove the specialised language then the words that simply convey complex and sophisticated understanding are lost and the brevity of discussion and written work becomes seriously hard work.

In my view if you are involved in training in a new skill set but remove the definition and subsequent use of specialist terms from the training then the delegates, on entering the culture of the new area of work, are at a serious disadvantage. If someone did not know the basic terms of a skill set then existing members of the club would not view them particularly highly.

If in financial services for example: CCA¹, FLA², ISA³ and FSA⁴ were not taught to a newcomer then they would have difficulty initially in becoming part of the culture, being regarded by colleagues, whether rightly or not, as naïve and inexperienced.

On the other hand I recently sat in a meeting with a technical architect who used three letter acronyms so much that unless you knew the subject very well you had not a hope of understanding a word he said. The issue here was that I was not part of the culture where the language was being used and this was the mistake of the jargon user in not appreciating that some of his audience would not

understand what on earth he was talking about.

The real issue is that when members of a community communicate outwardly from their world then the use of jargon is inappropriate whilst when language is used internally then it helps promote clarity in thinking and development of the skill set or subject matter in hand.

In all communication the key point is to understand and have empathy for the receiver of the communication, and that is where we need to evaluate the use of language critically.

If you are going to use specialist language it certainly needs some reflection on your audience before using it and at least at the initial use of a particular term a definition in the text or a footnote or, in verbal communication, an explanation or agreement that the term is clearly understood. It is all about balance, as so many things are in life, and understanding that there are shades of grey and not everything is black and white. So my argument is that the use of jargon isn't all bad but it needs to be appropriate.

David Winders.

¹ Consumer Credit Act

² Finance & Leasing Association

³ Individual Savings Account

⁴ Financial Services Authority