

Commentaries and Applied Research for
Practitioners and Educators

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EXECUTIVES' ATTITUDES TO BUSINESS SLANG

BACKGROUND

Few parts of the English language change as rapidly, or as subtly, as that motley collection of words and phrases variously referred to as slang, jargon, cliches, "in" words, or, to use the favoured American term, "buzzwords" (itself an example of the phenomenon).

Most of us are daily bombarded by requests not to reinvent the wheel, to put our pet projects on the back burner, to come up with a ballpark figure, to touch base with the boss before he leaves for the weekend, or, most hallowed of all, not to forget the sanctity of the bottom line!

As managers increasingly acquire terminals and keyboards in the form of "professional work stations", the trickle of terms seeping out of the esoteric language of the computer technicians has become a flood and some managers are already being judged in terms of their user friendliness.

The spread of computer-speak is only the most recent of an ongoing tension in the English language between the standard language of the well educated, general public, and the influx of terms for specialised and arcane professions and discourses.

As with other uses of language, however, whether it be crude humour on a solemn occasion, or blasphemy in a church, the topic of Business Slang provokes a strong reaction. Most people in Business have opinions about it, ranging from purist rejection to enthusiastic acceptance.

The purpose of this study was to go beyond the mountain of anecdotal evidence on this subject and survey what the attitudes of executives were to the value and use of business slang.

The finance directors, or their nominees, of 200 of Australia's largest 1000 companies were asked to complete a questionnaire designed to seek information about actual attitudes toward business slang expressions. It was considered that finance directors would be unlikely to have vested interest in this area, unlike Public Relations Managers who are often the professional wordsmiths for their organisations.

For this study, the term "business slang expression" refers to a word or phrase - usually ephemeral, often nonstandard, rarely included in dictionaries in its specific business sense - which is nonetheless used frequently in business to communicate on the job.

Because most books and public opinions on the subject of Business English emanate from English teachers or

professional writers, they reflect an understandable bias. Slang is most often seen by them as an abuse of language, as an adulteration of the pristine purity of the mother language which has given us everthing from Shakespeare to the evening news on the national radio, as a sign of sloppy thinking, indeed as direct evidence of the absence of any thinking at all!

This study does not attempt to overturn the conventional wisdom of the learned and the literary, but to see what attitudes are held by senior communicators who are not professionally committed to the values of standard English. If many proficient business communicators find these terms functional, then perhaps the strong negative attitudes toward business slang held by many academics, journalists and many of those who present staff training courses on Report and Letter Writing are due for revision.

The study, in specific terms, sought to discover what attitudes are held toward business slang and to discern:

- 1) the tolerance of executives toward the use of business slang,
- 2) whether the executives use business slang themselves, and if so, under what circumstances,
- 3) whether business slang has any "password" value in admitting its user to an in-group, and
- 4) for what purposes business slang is used.

PROCEDURE

A questionnaire of 43 items* was framed using items of business slang collected from U.S. and Australian sources. A list of typical business slang expressions was also included to give respondents a clear idea of language to be commented on (see appendix for list). The first 33 items were attitude statements on business slang. For each statement respondents were requested to rate their degree of agreement on a Likert scale (1 = "strongly agree", to 5 = strongly disagree). Of these 33 items, 27 items were statements which were framed to be either positive or negative toward business slang. The other 6 attitude statements were about slang, neither positive nor negative. The remaining 10 items in the questionnaire sought other perspectives on business slang and organisational data about respondents.

Questionnaires were sent to the Finance Directors of 200 companies, randomly selected from a list of Australia's 1000 largest companies.** Seventy-seven replies were received - a response rate of 38.5%. This compares favourably to the 30% to 40% rate which is expected from surveys requiring questionnaire return by mail.

* Based on Survey Instrument developed by Professor Gilsdorf (1).

** One mailing was made of the questionnaire (Sept. '84). The high cost of mail surveys ruled out a second mailing. Non-response bias was not assessed.

Respondents described themselves as "Executive" in 39 instances, "Upper Management" (15), "Middle Management" (16), "Administrator" (6), other (1). Sixty-eight were male, nine female. Forty-two respondents came from a Finance/Accounting Department, 10 from Central Administration, 12 from Marketing, seven from Personnel and three each from Production and Data Processing. A number of nominees of finance directors completed the questionnaire.

Prior to mailing, the questionnaire was circulated to several senior finance personnel for comment and review. They experienced no difficulty with the questionnaire and viewed it a valid instrument for establishing attitudes about business slang.

Data analysis involved nonparametric tests of difference among groups and descriptive statistics (median, mean, frequency) to identify agreement profiles on statements about business slang.

OVERALL RESULTS

The results overall indicate that there was low consensus among executives in their attitudes to business slang. Table 1 below indicates for the 33 attitude statements the percentage response of the respondents for each point on the agreement scale. The median, mean and standard deviation are also provided.

Median statistics were below 2.0 (indicating strong agreement) for only four statements. Statements 2, 4, 9, and 10 registered strong agreement. Of the 33 statements the medians for 16 fell within the range 2.0 to 3.0. Only one item (statement 20) had a median above 4.0 indicating strong disagreement.

While 52% agreed that "there is always a better way to say a thing than to use a business slang expression" (only 30% disagree), a majority (82%) agreed that "a current business slang expression can sometimes improve communication" and an even higher 88% believed that "business slang expressions vary widely in kind and quality".

Results which seemed to accept the value of business slang in certain situations were the following:

- * Sometimes, using a current business slang expression is the most precise, 67% agreed exact way to express something.
- * The use of a business slang expression can make talking easier. 70% agreed
- * Use of business slang expressions usually interferes with communication. 60% disagreed

TABLE 1

PERCEPTIONS OF BUSINESS SLANG IN AUSTRALIAN BUSINESS

	$\frac{1}{\%}$	$\frac{2}{\%}$	$\frac{3}{\%}$	$\frac{4}{\%}$	$\frac{5}{\%}$	<u>Median</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>S.D.</u>
1. There is always a better way to say a thing than to use a business slang expression.	12.4	40.2	6.5	28.6	1.3	2.16	2.44	1.17
2. Business slang expressions vary widely in kind and quality.	50.6	37.7	5.2	6.5	0	1.48	1.67	.85
3. Business slang is often used by "in" people to keep the "out" people out.	7.8	42.9	14.3	26.0	9.1	2.48	2.85	1.16
4. Sometimes, using a current business slang expression can improve communication.	24.7	57.1	6.5	7.8	3.9	1.94	2.09	.98
5. Business slang expressions annoy me when I hear them used.	11.7	22.1	24.7	29.9	11.7	3.15	3.07	1.21
6. Use of business slang expressions usually interferes with communication.	7.8	19.5	13.0	45.5	14.3	3.71	3.39	1.18
7. Sometimes, using a current business slang expression is the most precise, exact way to express something.	27.3	40.3	10.4	18.2	3.9	2.06	2.31	1.17
8. People should write and speak carefully using standard English, not any other kind of language.	29.9	20.8	9.1	31.2	9.1	2.46	2.68	1.41
9. Business slang expressions are appropriate only to some speaking and writing situations.	28.9	47.4	10.5	13.2	0	1.94	2.07	.96
10. Sometimes I don't understand what a given business slang expression means when I hear it used.	28.9	44.7	7.9	13.2	5.3	1.97	2.22	1.15
11. The use of a business slang expression can make talking easier.	13.0	57.1	11.7	14.3	3.9	2.14	2.39	1.01
12. Using a current business slang expression gives the user the feeling that he or she is in the know, an insider.	15.6	39.0	27.3	16.9	1.3	2.38	2.49	.99
13. Anyone who would use business slang expressions is an unoriginal thinker.	6.5	16.9	14.3	40.3	22.1	3.80	3.54	1.19
14. People who use a great many business slang expressions show that they are unoriginal thinkers.	14.3	27.3	13.0	29.9	15.6	3.15	3.05	1.33
15. When I hear a person use an out-of-date business slang expression, I am likely to revise my opinion of that person's ability.	1.3	18.4	42.1	25.0	13.2	3.21	3.30	.96
16. People who use business slang expressions tend to be pretentious.	3.9	36.4	18.2	29.9	11.7	3.03	3.09	1.13

1 = Strongly Agree; 2 = Agree Somewhat; 3 = No Opinion; 4 = Disagree Somewhat; 5 = Strongly Disagree.

* Significant difference ($p < .05$) between 4 levels of management mean responses.

1. Executive
2. Upper Management
3. Middle Management
4. Administrative Assistant.

	<u>1</u> %	<u>2</u> %	<u>3</u> %	<u>4</u> %	<u>5</u> %	<u>Median</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>S.D.</u>
17. People who use business slang expressions tend to be insecure.	2.6	15.6	31.2	29.9	20.8	3.52	3.50	1.07
18. Most people who use current business slang are on the way up in the organization.	3.9	7.9	42.1	36.8	9.2	3.40	3.39	.91
19. Business slang expressions are always fuzzy and imprecise.	0	18.2	9.1	53.2	19.5	3.92	3.74	.97
20. I am likely to use current business slang expressions in <u>formal</u> on-the-job writing.	3.9	11.8	6.6	42.1	35.5	4.15	3.93	1.12
*21. I am likely to use current business slang expression in <u>informal</u> on-the-job writing.	7.8	48.1	7.8	24.7	11.7	2.37	2.84	1.22
22. I am likely to use current business slang expressions in <u>formal</u> on-the-job speaking (e.g., a presentation before a group of 30-50 people).	7.9	49.4	7.8	27.3	7.8	2.35	2.77	1.16
23. I am likely to use current business slang expressions in <u>informal</u> on-the-job talking.	11.7	74.0	6.5	5.2	2.6	2.01	2.13	0.78
24. I would prefer not to hear any business slang expressions used in any oral, informal business discussions.	11.7	11.7	20.8	28.6	27.3	3.70	3.48	1.32
25. I would prefer not to see any business slang expressions used in memos that I get.	19.5	27.3	15.6	24.7	13.0	2.70	2.84	1.34
26. I would prefer not to see any business slang expressions used in letters that I get.	23.7	34.2	14.5	15.8	11.8	2.26	2.57	1.32
27. I would prefer not to hear any business slang expressions spoken in committee meetings.	15.6	15.6	24.7	27.3	16.9	3.26	3.14	1.31
28. Once the "out" people start using a business slang expression, it's no longer an expression I would care to use.	1.3	6.5	32.5	22.1	37.7	3.94	3.88	1.03
*29. I like some business slang. When people use it I react favorably to it and to them.	1.3	31.2	40.3	16.9	10.4	2.93	3.03	.97
30. I dislike some business slang. When people use it I react unfavorably against it and them.	14.5	27.6	22.4	27.6	7.9	2.85	2.86	1.20
31. Most business slang comes to us from America.	16.9	33.8	35.1	11.7	2.6	2.48	2.49	.99
32. A business slang expression sometimes fills a gap in the language by naming a thing that had no name before.	16.9	51.9	13.0	13.0	5.2	2.13	2.37	1.07
33. Some business slang expressions are amusing.	15.8	60.5	14.5	5.3	3.9	2.06	2.21	.91

1 = Strongly Agree; 2 = Agree Somewhat; 3 = No Opinion; 4 = Disagree Somewhat; 5 = Strongly Disagree.

* Significant difference ($p < .05$) between 4 levels of management mean responses.

1. Executive
2. Upper Management
3. Middle Management
4. Administrative Assistant.

These responses seem to indicate broad support for the view that business slang is not viewed negatively by a majority of senior executives surveyed. However, three provisos need to be made:

- i) A substantial minority did express negative attitudes to such language. Thirty-four percent were "annoyed" when they heard such phrases used, and 35% considered that these phrases "interfere" with communication. Fifty percent believed that "people should write and speak carefully using standard English, not any other kind of language".
- ii) While business slang was accepted as useful by most, there did not seem to be marked positive or negative values associated with its users. Only 19% thought that their opinions of others' ability varied according to the jargon they used; only 18% thought that jargon devotees were insecure, but 40% did think that such users were being pretentious when using the latest "in" words! Asked whether they agreed that "anyone who used business slang expressions is an unoriginal thinker", 23% agreed, but 62% disagreed.
- iii) It seems that business slang does not find blanket acceptance. Most agree that it has a value but that this depends on the specific circumstances

involved. While only 16% agreed they would be likely to use current business slang expressions in formal on-the-job writing, this number went up to 56% for informal writing, 57% for formal speaking situations and 86% for informal speaking situations.

The increasing influence of American corporate culture on Australian business behaviour could well be surmised from the response to one question. Asked whether most business slang comes to us from America, 51% agreed, 14% disagreed (the rest had no opinion). The nature of most current slang tends to support the dominance of American influences. For example, baseball is reflected in "touch base" and "ballpark figure", but there do not seem to be analogous instances from cricket.

SOME SPECIFIC RESULTS

(a) Judgement of Others

Six statements were included to test respondents' willingness to make certain judgements about people on the basis of the use of business slang. When assessments were made of the response patterns to each of these statements, persons responding "no opinion, neutral", were considered along with those marking either "disagree" response, because any one of the three responses indicated an unwillingness to make the statement judgement about a user of business slang.

These six statements were included because they appeared to be the judgements most frequently made about users of business slang (Table 2).

TABLE 2
WILLINGNESS TO JUDGE OTHERS ON THE BASIS OF SLANG USE

	$\frac{1}{\%}$	$\frac{2}{\%}$	$\frac{3}{\%}$	$\frac{4}{\%}$	$\frac{5}{\%}$	<u>Median</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>S.D.</u>
16. People who use business slang expressions tend to be pretentious.	3.9	36.4	18.2	29.9	11.7	3.03	3.09	1.13
14. People who use a great many business slang expressions show that they are unoriginal thinkers.	14.3	27.3	13.0	29.9	15.6	3.15	3.05	1.33
15. When I hear a person use an out-of-date business slang expression, I am likely to revise my opinion of that person's ability.	1.3	18.4	42.1	25.0	13.2	3.21	3.30	.96
17. People who use business slang expressions tend to be Insecure.	2.6	15.6	31.2	29.9	20.8	3.52	3.50	1.07
18. Most people who use current business slang are on the way up in the organization.	3.9	7.9	42.1	36.8	9.2	3.40	3.39	.91
13. Anyone who would use business slang expressions is an unoriginal thinker.	6.5	16.9	14.3	40.3	22.1	3.80	3.54	1.19

* * * * *

Respondents were more willing to judge a business slang user as pretentious and as an unoriginal thinker than to make the judgements about other stated characteristics of slang users. Only a fifth felt less of a person for using an outdated business slang expression, or judged business slang users as insecure. Only 10% were willing to associate the use of current business slang with the likelihood of rising in the organisational hierarchy.

Occasional users of business slang expressions appear safe from being labelled unoriginal by others. "Anyone who would use a business slang expression is an unoriginal thinker" received agreement from fewer than one in four. However, response to a statement labelling heavy users of business slang as unoriginal registered stronger (40%) agreement.

(b) Slang as a Password

Four statements tested the view that the use of business slang serves as a sort of password to the inner circles of business.

"Using a current business slang expression gives the user the feeling that he or she is in the know, an insider", drew much agreement - more than half the respondents marked an "agree" category. Fifty percent of respondents agreed that slang was used by "in" people to keep the "out" people out.

Four-fifths of all respondents were unwilling to say they would judge ill of a person who used out-dated business slang. A further statement probed whether slang lost its acceptability and use when used by "non-insiders". In response to "once the 'out' people start using a business slang expression, it's no longer an expression I would care to use," only 8% of respondents marked the "agree" categories. Many were neutral, and almost 60% disagreed.

(c) Purpose of Slang

An interesting group of statements and responses referred to the purposes of business slang. Some specific response data is reported below:

- * It can sometimes improve communication. Median response 1.94.
- * It is sometimes the most precise, exact way to express something. Median response 2.06.
- * It can make talking easier. Median response 2.14.
- * It sometimes fills a gap in the language by naming a think that had no name before. Median response 2.13.
- * Some business slang expressions are amusing. Median response 2.06.

Respondents did not support these negative statements:

- * Use of business slang expressions usually interferes with communication. Median response 3.71.
- * Business slang expressions are always fuzzy and imprecise. Median response 3.92.

Respondents had some decided views about business slang. The qualified ("sometimes", "can") format of the 'proslang' statements and the much less qualified ("usually", "always") format of the 'antislant' statements, reflect a range of tenable positions on the subject. The strength of the responses in both directions is noteworthy: the "pro" statements drew median responses from 2.14 to 1.94; the "anti" statements' median responses were very close to 4.

Some negative statements about business slang received varied support. For example, one third of respondents said that business slang expressions annoyed them. Responses were evenly divided on "People should write and speak carefully using standard English, not any other kind of language." Almost 75% agreed that they sometimes did not understand a given business slang expression when they heard it used.

(d) Context of Slang

Analysis of responses revealed that the use of business slang expressions in formal writing tasks was less likely than in informal on-the-job talking. Eighty-five percent of respondents considered themselves unlikely to use business slang expressions in formal writing tasks. More than half said they were likely to use the terms in formal on-the-job speaking. Fifty-five percent said they would be likely to use the terms in informal business writing.

Respondents objected to the use of slang in letters more than they did to its use in memos. For memos, the response pattern revealed a close split for and against slang use. For the statement about letters, nearly a quarter of all respondents objected to slang use in letters (another third objected somewhat); there were a few strong supporters of business slang use in letters (10%).

CONCLUSION

This survey on business slang revealed a range of attitudes about business slang; varying attitudes were registered for tolerance towards slang, and for its purposes and context. Results showed that business slang did not find blanket acceptance, although most respondents agreed that slang had a value depending on the circumstances of use.

Slang was used in certain formal situations, and most respondents did not see slang interfering with communications. A majority agreed that using a business slang expression could make talking easier.

In general the survey's conclusions appear to parallel Gilsdorf's study (1); that executives appear not to be strongly hostile to business slang, and find it useful in a variety of ways.

REFERENCE

- (1) Gilsdorf, J.W. Executive and Managerial Attitudes Toward Business Slang: A Fortune List Survey, Journal of Business Communications, 20:4, 1983.

APPENDIXExample Items - Business Slang

bottom line	interface (non-technical) use
watershed	get your act together
parameters	networking
K (for "thousand")	put you right
at your earliest convenience	entropy
buzz words	mid-course correction
eyeball-to-eyeball	logistics
accountability	reinventing the wheel
at this point in time	ballpark figure
back to square one	off the track
counterproductive	hands on
down the track	mindset
conventional wisdom	viable
synergistic	thumbs up
case in point	uptight
trending	