

*Definitive and Meaningless:*

# **The Rise of Jargon**

**WHITEPAPER**

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That imprecision may emerge accidentally, through inconsistent usage, or because the word itself was overreaching.

Either way, the truth, or at least relevance, lies buried.

Definitive and Meaningless: The Rise of Jargon

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# An Introduction: Definitive and Meaningless

Once, I noticed something curious about the label on a jar of sauerkraut. The packaging proclaimed that it was “100% German quality.”

Before I proceed, you may already be asking: what does fermented cabbage have to do with tech policy? Well, both this jar of cabbage and Silicon Valley can be, at times, definitive and meaningless.

The sauerkraut could be 100% German, if it was made in Germany (it was not). It could follow a 100% German recipe, to the extent that a recipe can be reliably traced (some claim that Genghis Khan first brought a rice wine version of sauerkraut into Europe). But “quality” is at least somewhat rooted in perception.

It’s hard enough to standardize quality across processes and outputs. Can you really nationalize the concept of quality, and then transport that nationalized quality to producers and co-packers in an entirely different country? Of course, you can’t. Was I meant to think about this so extensively? Of course, I wasn’t.

And yet, there was the unapologetic label, at once definitive and meaningless: “100% German quality.”

As the tech industry engages in hype cycles, promising or even threatening disruption, it frequently invokes jargon that produces a similar effect.

Digital transformation, smart cities, AR/VR/XR... the list is endless.

We are meant to be impressed, but also slightly bewildered. The terms sound definitive while the meaning escapes us. Sometimes, it isn’t even there.



## Why We Use Jargon

There are good practical reasons for working professionals to use specialized terms but jargon often stretches far beyond those working needs. What's worse, it can even run counter to those working needs.

For example, if potential customers don't talk the same language as vendors, they might use different keywords in their search terms. That could impact organ search. Through jargon, companies are losing meaning as well as potential connections.

We need to reconnect our business language with meaning and value.

We also need to reconnect business value with societal value.

That may sound grandiose but it's a reflection of what is at stake whenever we give names to things, or presume a shared interpretation of broad forces in a complex world.

Jargon can be unnecessarily cryptic. It can also contain clues. It can point you toward a powerful idea or intention that got lost somewhere along the way, or that was too complex for easy synthesis and too tiresome to repeatedly express in full.

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That imprecision may emerge accidentally, through inconsistent usage, or because the word itself was overreaching.

Either way, the truth, or at least relevance, lies buried.

Meaningless corporate jargon is actually meant to do something. By recalling that meaning, instead of merely rolling our eyes, we can better engage one another from a relevant, shared point of understanding.

In addition to jargon, there are known business euphemisms that aim to downplay or disguise warning signs, failures, and conflict. This is the art of avoidance.

Some academics have speculated that so-called meaningless work actually leads to meaningless terminology, a point that seems newly relevant at a time when societies in crisis are identifying essential workers and services.

Critics of jargon tend to focus on these aspects, where the doublespeak carries a manipulative, self-serving intent. But I think they sometimes miss all of the other times when jargon tries to highlight something, instead of hide it. That something just happens to be esoteric, abstract, or so forward-thinking that it's essentially amorphous.

Take the current jargon phrase "digital transformation."

In the 1990s, organizations came to understand that exceptional mastery of IT would result in a competitive edge, or at least more process efficiency. At the time, they called it "business process reengineering."

This term was about acknowledging and accepting that technology had become relevant to every quadrant of a SWOT analysis (another piece of jargon). Failure to integrate tech solutions, to act on new inputs, and to realign activities and resources with objectives could kill an organization.

This is a dramatic idea. The trouble is that it lies hidden beneath a tech buzzword used monotonously and indiscriminately by executives and thought leaders.



## Rediscovered Meaning

There's a well-known joke in Silicon Valley: it's AI when you're pitching it, ML when you're hiring for it, and linear algebra when you're implementing it. The underlying technology remains the same but the jargon adapts to intentions and context.

Jargon can be both a hindrance and a help. It works as shorthand when both parties know or agree what the shorthand means.

However, jargon is counterproductive when it fails to convey a value proposition to a potential customer or ally.

A blunt, uncomplicated observation can feel profound and revelatory, even when it's something that is commonly or intuitively known, precisely because we have allowed for the accumulation of so much imprecision.

The former CEO of Evernote, Phil Libin, [has revealed](#) that Bill Gates once called him out for describing his product as a "platform." Gates essentially said that a platform creates a high amount of external value by allowing others to build things on top of it, which Evernote's product didn't quite do and which many alleged platforms don't do.

Initially, Phil Libin was offended, but he conceded that Gates was right and this critical insight was illuminating. In this instance, the misuse of jargon had acted as a hindrance.

[Collin Cadmus](#), a sales executive, has gained a following on LinkedIn by sharing content that [resonates](#) with sales professionals as being relevant and true.

Taking on the industry term "SaaS," he candidly wrote: "SaaS. Software as a Service.



The name couldn't be more clear, yet so many SaaS companies focus on building great software but neglect delivering world-class service.”

Cadmus suggested that the overall customer experience falls apart when the product support, or even the sales process, is disconnected from the principle of “service.”

Professional jargon may sometimes deviate from clearer ways of communication, but ways of working can sometimes deviate from reality and objectives. An emphasis on the underlying meaning, or original intention, of jargon could guide people back. In this respect, the jargon may be helpful.

# What is Truly Transformation?

## Perspectives

- [Front's website states](#): “Email wasn’t built for team collaboration and we can all feel it — including your customers.”
- [According to Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella](#), “we’ve seen two years’ worth of digital transformation in two months” as the result of the pandemic, quarantine measures, and IT adaptations.
- IT professionals are frequently bombarded with B2B sales. [According to Elizabeth Ronco](#), Executive Director of Product Management for Spiceworks, vendors could succeed by shifting their focus from a list of contacts, to the *context*. New AI-powered tools can gauge interest and even brand affinity by analyzing intent data.

**“Digital transformation” may have superseded “business process reengineering,” but too often, it’s a catch-all term. Many “transformation” products are actually quick value-adds.**

And there’s nothing wrong with these. They are important and perhaps even a commercial imperative, given the need for demonstrated ROI and integrations into complex workflows.

However, there are also times when the things we take for granted are candidates for “transformation” in a more fundamental sense of the word.

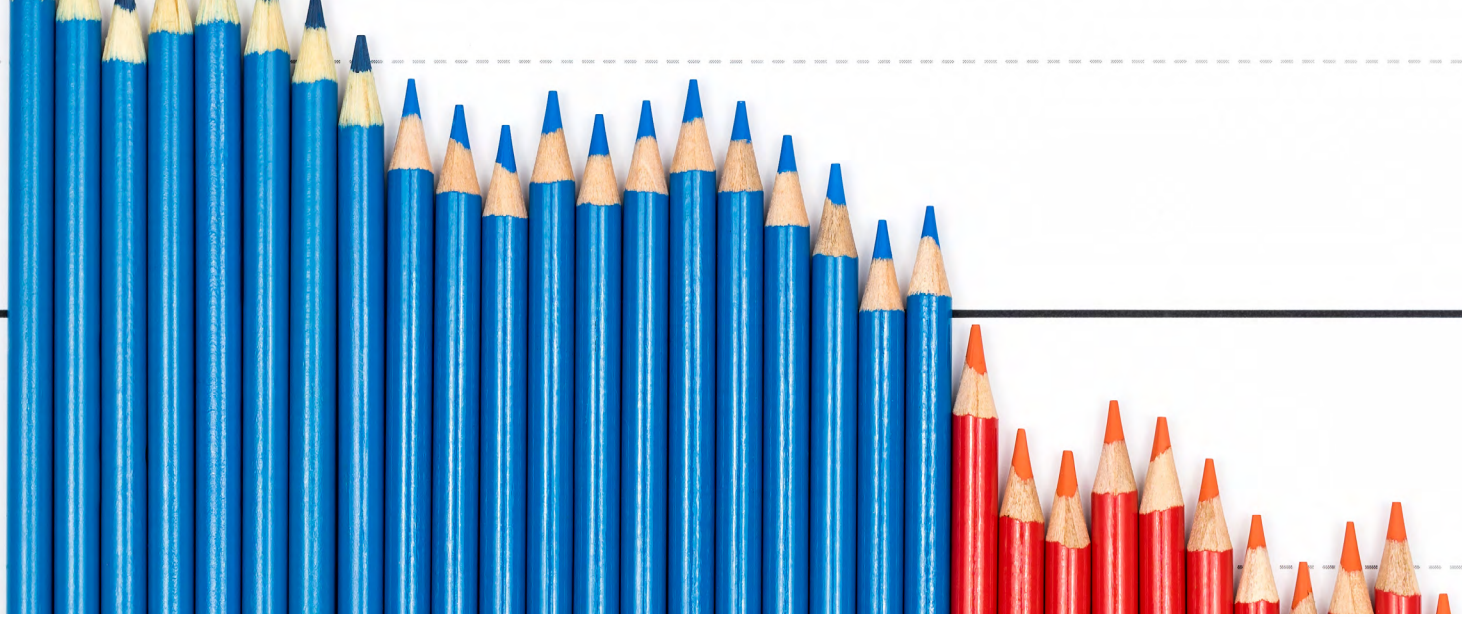
Unpacking words can be valuable. Everyone knows what “email” means but the name still suggests a form of mail. Does that premise still make sense?

[In early 2020](#), Front raised \$59M on the theory that it doesn’t, because everyone’s inboxes are siloed.

“If you want to collaborate, you have to cc or bcc, and that only creates more emails and duplicates of the same information in everyone’s inbox,” said co-founder and CEO Mathilde Collin.

[Front’s](#) rethink allows users to see who is responding in real-time, to reassign actionable information, to establish rules for automatic routing, and to turn the inbox into more of a workplace hub. [Superhuman](#) is another attempt to create a differentiated email product that targets, and learns from, particularly active email users.

These startups are betting that it’s time for “email” to undergo a fundamental “transformation.”



## Being Certain About an Uncertain Future

Perhaps part of the problem here is that the tech industry is trying to be certain about an uncertain future. With so much change on the horizon, it's tempting to be both definitive and meaningless, like a patriotic jar of sauerkraut.

With that being said, we also need to acknowledge that technological complexity sometimes eludes crystallization in common language.

As journalist Adrian Bridgwater wrote [in \*TechHQ\*](#), data itself has become a business language, and the ability to make sense of data in a relatively raw form could offer a short-term skills advantage in the labor market, until new tools emerge.

Jargon isn't always necessary but the skills gap is very real. And the failure to bridge that skills gap could lead to unfilled positions, during a time of high unemployment.

When we're squabbling over the right words, we're sometimes really deciding upon the underlying technologies. Workers need to know what business leaders mean, in order to determine what they should probably learn and do in this quickly changing economy.

Sometimes, the business leaders don't know what they mean because a certain amount of R&D must precede specific use cases. In other instances, the technical term precedes even the R&D. It is a way of initiating or shifting progress.

Nevertheless, we must assume some level of responsibility over the clarity and precision in our language, even as unknowns linger. The language is an instrument, not unlike the tech being discussed and developed.

Jargon is divisive when it's addressing the present day, it's limited when addressing the near future, and when you look too far ahead, it's almost entirely useless. Emerging technologies need to be rigorously explained. Shorthand could layer on additional levels of assumption.



## Our Language Contains Our Humanity

There is also a need to continually remind ourselves of basic truths, both business truths and deeply human truths that become symbolized or encrypted.

While imparting advice about life, the writer David Foster Wallace once said, “On one level, we all know this stuff already — it’s been codified as myths, proverbs, clichés, epigrams, parables: the skeleton of every great story. The whole trick is keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness.”

In certain respects, the function of dysfunctional technical jargon can also be seen in particularly opaque poetry.

“Many poets use language as camouflage. But if you dare to be clear, you open yourself to criticism because people can say it’s pretty dull,” said former US Poet Laureate Billy Collins. This is perhaps similar to a founder who vaguely references “AI,” to cover up an ill-considered business plan.

In March 2018, I wrote a somewhat viral article that explored the lack of consensus around the definition of “AI.” I asked, “When is it important to be accurate to a term’s original definition, and when does that commitment to accuracy amount to the splitting of hairs? It isn’t obvious, and hype is oftentimes the enemy of nuance. Additionally, there is now a vested interest in that hype — \$12 billion, to be precise.”

(That figure was rooted in a KPMG Enterprise global analysis of 2017 AI-related venture funding.)

We need to challenge the indiscriminate usage of terms. But we should also challenge

some of the worldviews that underlie jargon, to ensure that we're objectively assessing all of the different stakeholders and possible outcomes.

“AI” can be seen as a disruptor to the workforce. It can also be seen as a means of freeing up intellectual and creative capital, making work more enjoyable for workers.

“Data” is a way of optimizing processes and improving outputs (which, in the case of AgriTech, may even increase the food supply. It's also potentially an oppressive tool for surveillance states and a point of concern for privacy advocates.

Neither word, on its own, pinpoints a use case or connotation. Writers and speakers need to deliberately and effectively convey their tone and intention, as well as context. The word is, at best, a hook, luring someone into deeper engagement.

As Orwell made clear in his famous essay, political writing is often vague, stale, and almost indifferent when it comes to the delivery of meaning.

Politics is essentially the engagement of different stakeholders. When it comes to jargon, it's important to ask: What is really at stake here? What could be gained or lost?

Some words are used as sledgehammers, to create hype and sell things. Others are used as precision instruments, to explore a possibility with nuance. Oftentimes, the real problem is the lack of craftsmanship, or the lack of awareness and agreement over what is being built or changed.

It's possible to dismiss all of this by saying, “It's just sauerkraut.” And yes, it is. But through language, we dismiss and affirm things routinely: How often are we definitive and meaningless? How often are we honest, searching, inclusive, and evidence-based?

# Key Takeaways

- An emphasis on the underlying meaning, or original intention, of jargon could guide people back to more effective ways of working. “Software as a service” companies should focus on the quality of their services. “Platforms” should allow third parties to build a high degree of external value.
- Many “transformation” products are quick value-adds, which is important and perhaps even a commercial imperative, given the need for demonstrated ROI and integrations into complex workflows. However, there are also times when we need to fundamentally reconsider the things we take for granted. This can lead to much deeper “transformation.”
- Business leaders need to clarify their jargon so that the labor force can learn the relevant skills. The skills gap serves neither workers nor employers.
- B2B vendors can communicate, and sell, more effectively if they develop a contextual understanding. Sometimes, intent data can help with that.
- Emerging technologies need to be rigorously explained. Shorthand could layer on additional levels of assumption.
- To illuminate politicized language and terminology, ask: What is really at stake here? What could be gained or lost?