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Dealing with Jargon – for managers in
the built environment
by Tom Taylor

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Introduction

These notes look at jargon for managers in the built environment, plus aspects of sector language, management speak and related techy vocabulary and current themes. The managers may be on the receiving end, or on the providing end, or as an observer, or all three, and across the same day, or even during the same event.

These notes may be of interest to others in built environment - possibly, and to managers and others in other industries, locations and team combinations – possibly.

So, what is it?

"Jargon (noun) – special words or expressions used by individuals or a group – which may be difficult for others to understand. This can include buzzwords."

Jargon in Context

Jargon should be useful – to provide quick, precise, clear communication conventions and understandings – in written, spoken and illustrative media – within and across teams. That is as long as it does not disadvantage, confuse or alienate participants. In that case at the unfortunate end, jargon may be accused of being gibberish or gobbledygook or worse.

Jargon is inevitable, so it relies on managers and leaders to ensure it is effective and efficient. They should be jargon-busters to facilitate the positive and counteract the negative. The negative can include possible embarrassment, alienation and disengagement with loss of participation, productivity and commitment. The positives can include precision, common understanding and team bonding.

Overuse of jargon can be because of laziness, wishing to demonstrate expertise or other ways of showing off, or simply because of conventions in a community or from the top leaders.

The built environment sector is a very large and diverse collection of industries and businesses – each with its own jargon covering elements, trades, suppliers, legalese, etc.

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The built environment is also a service industry in capital works activity and in operational in BAU / FM terms *(Sorry! That's jargon! Business As Usual / Facilities Management)* so needs to recognise and accommodate the jargon of its customers, clients, stakeholders, regulators, media, general public, etc. So, it is important to recognise, adopt or explain jargon so it can be understood and appreciated by all those involved.

The client occupiers were a prestigious firm of solicitors. As part of the briefing, they frequently mentioned the importance of the "Fionas". It was thought that this was a set of initials which would become clearer in due course. It did, these were the "fee-earners". That did not stop them being known as the Fiona's for the rest of the project duration.

Jargon Maturity

Jargon effectiveness on projects can be influenced by subsector maturity and the familiarity of the participants. So those who are generally experienced in aspects of built environment will be knowledgeable and comfortable with the jargon. While those who are in education or new to or outside of the subsector may be less knowledgeable and confident.

In fact, the maturity of a project team can be assessed by observing its comfort in the use of jargon, and how the participants deal with potential jargon misunderstandings and alienation issues as they may arise or even be anticipated.

An education project had three grades of duration for fitouts and setups: Basic for simple spaces with furniture in max one week (Blue Rooms), Medium with IT and AV installations of max two weeks (Yellow Rooms), and Complex as laboratories in up to six weeks (Red Spaces). Initially these areas and colours were marked on a single drawing in the management office and used knowingly by those who had been briefed on the drawing. When the drawing was copied and posted on each floor for all to see the jargon became much useful and clearer to all. Tell everyone who needs to know.

Aspects of Jargon.

Jargon can be influenced by:

- new words – that may find their way into dictionaries and glossaries.
- new phrases as assemblies of known words
- 2,3,4,5 or more sets of initials e.g. BBC, CNN or acronyms e.g. NATO, NASA.
- Misuse of words and phrases.
- Speaking quickly while using jargon.
- Mixing or overloading jargon into a sentence or paragraph.
- Use of vernacular – which can be cool or hot or nice.
- Computerese, legalese, engineeringese.
- Name dropping.
- Commercial and patented products and systems.

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- Processes and procedures.
- Numbers on forms.
- Scientific and medical terms.
- Words and phrases in foreign languages - n'est-ce pas?
- Distortion through technology and accents.
- Etc.

Jargon Busting Techniques.

Here are a few jargon busting techniques if you or others are new to the built environment or similarly in any other sector:

- Read some relevant textbooks on built environment and project management, separate and combined – to pick up vocabulary.
- Study sector podcasts, blogs, magazines and articles – for phrasing and pronunciation.
- Join APM and BEIN, be an active participant and proceed to appropriate qualifications – or equivalents.
- Identify glossaries, dictionaries and internet sources which may assist – in advance of situations and keep notes of findings, or as arising. Make sure such general explanations or definitions do suit your circumstances.

General tips and rules of thumb can include:

- The first time the jargon appears in your document / communication / report write it out in full (and then provide initials within brackets – to be used thereafter) and / or provide an explanation or footnote.
- And do this every time, as used for the first time, in later separate documents, sets of notes, minutes, etc.
- Similarly in audio situations in meetings and conversations.
- Similarly with names of people and organisations – using their initials thereafter.
- Recognise the helpful people who can explain jargon well and correctly. As jargon busters.
- Ask the people who are using jargon to explain – and see if others agree.
- Wait until it becomes clear – don't interrupt immediately. Sometimes this is around the third or fourth use.
- Let others interrupt or follow up to ask for clarification!
- And if it is not clear to you and others and no-one else is asking – then You ask.
- Don't apologise for not knowing. Just ask for explanation or clarification. Say Thank You.
- Gain confidence in asking about jargon to enable asking or conversing on other matters.

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- Observe the people who seek clarifications well and not so well – to pick up techniques you might apply or avoid.
- Identify the people and organisations who are particularly prolific in using jargon, generally or for their specialisms – and consider how to deal with them accordingly.
- Include glossaries with plain English explanations of relevant jargon in project handbooks and the like.
- Have team competitions for "new jargon of the week" or month – with a small prize.
- Where people over-use jargon introduces even more jargon, so they have to ask you for explanations – and a truce may be adopted.
- Recognise that certain jargon may mean different things on different projects and even at different stages.
- Recognise that even common terms may mean different things to people for example between nouns and verbs – such as: report, schedule, programme / program.
- As a manager / leader / facilitator / chair / participant observe when and where jargon may be used which participants may be struggling to comprehend (even if you do) and speak out to arrange an explanation for all, or provide guidance later.
- If still confused ask during "Previous Minutes" at next meeting or in "Any Other Business" (AOB) in current meeting or similar.
- When people are nervous, speaking quickly and using excessive jargon, have some dialogue with them ... clarify some jargon as used .... to slow them down ..... and make their presentation / statement more ...... accessible and acceptable.

A project had a clear diagonal line across the site as a design feature and for sequencing. The concepts of West of the Line and East of the Line became quite clear and common to everyone involved. Things became complicated and uncertain when some people started saying Over the Line, Crossing the Line and On the Line. Keep it simple.

Simple Quizzing.

Some simple quizzing may assist in finding a team's common understandings on jargon to see if they are all on the same page. So, by means of example:

- At any time and location to ask, "Which way is North?"
- What is the difference between JCT and JCB? They can both get you in or out of a hole. In UK.
- What is the "traffic light system" when applied to this project? Or A, B, C status?
- What is airside and landside?
- What are bridges over and bridges under?
- What is the MEP - this time?
- What is a PCSA, its possible features and possible benefits? – this time.

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- What is the difference between demountable and re-mountable.
- And between punch out and punch up.

A team member said they were having trouble with MMB. We were disappointed that it appeared the Milk Marketing Board were not being collaborative. However, it turned out the difficulty was with a mouse middle button. A completely different difficulty and solution.

Jargon! There are plenty of opportunities for us all to share and use jargon to assist with the management of projects and programmes to meet their stage and overall targets. Good luck with it. Best wishes. Feel free to send us your acronym anecdotes, terrible terms and jumbled jargon. TTFN.

About the Author

Tom Taylor

London, UK

Tom Taylor is Principal with Dashdot and joint founding director of Buro Four in the United Kingdom. For many years, he has been a central figure in the Association for Project Management (APM) in the UK as former APM president, vice-president, Chair and London Branch. Via APM he has achieved Chartered Project Professional (ChPP), Registered Project Professional (RPP), an Honorary Fellowship, the inaugural President's Medal from Professor Martin Barnes and APM's prestigious Sir Monty Finneston Award for lifetime achievement. Visit www.apm.org.uk

Tom is known as:

- A popular, confident and energetic speaker and broadcaster;

- A prolific author and publisher on innovative business and original management issues;

- An experienced and enthusiastic lecturer and course leader;

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- And an award-winning, highly experienced manager of projects, advisor and consultant.

Tom's professional career so far has been in property and construction in UK in front line roles – from theatres to manufacturing, from residential to harbour works – significant to less so – with contractors, designers and as a consultant – as employer, employee and entrepreneur - within major organisations and "all-on-my-own" – prize winning and mundane. It's been rewarding and enjoyable – so far.

He is an advisor on projects, programmes, enterprises and business, as principal at Dashdot – a consultancy and publishing vehicle – please go to www.dashdot.co.uk

He is a joint founder from 1985 and occasional advisor with Buro Four – an eminent project management outfit based in UK - please go to www.burofour.com

Tom has been a guest lecturer at several universities, a previous Visiting Professor at Salford University and an external examiner at UCL.

Tom is a supporter of Membership Associations (MAs) of International Project Management Association (IPMA), Young Crews - and their events. Visit www.ipma.org

Tom attends, speaks and hosts PM events in UK and round the world. He holds honorary positions with project management associations in Finland, Kazakhstan, Nepal, Portugal, Spain and UK plus with IPMA.

"Continuing to be involved in front line projects and the journey of the project management community, over the last fifty years or so, has certainly been fascinating, rewarding and enjoyable – as a bystander, passenger, navigator and driver. Changing technologies and surprising opportunities have had significant impact for me, and on me. However, it is people, the colleagues, who are most important – with our collective commitment, common purpose and good humour. I have been very fortunate indeed in that aspect. Approaching my likely career midpoint, I am looking forward to more good projects, with good people, with good humour."

A current personal profile of Tom is available at www.tomtaylor.info and he may be contacted at tomtaylor@dashdot.co.uk