

BUSINESS BUZZWORDS: RIGHTSIZING, DOWNSIZING, RE-ENGINEERING, DE-LAYERING

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The paper attempts to analyse the rise and use of a new vocabulary (economic buzzwords) related to staff dismissal in the new economy of the world. In this new economy, the organizational boundaries between states and firms become unclear and a new vocabulary has been conceived in order to express the changes the firms are undergoing. The new rhetoric includes buzzwords like privatization, de-regulation, re-engineering, rightsizing, downsizing, de-layering, quality service or global sourcing. The research is based on the conclusions of bibliographical and direct research of the literature relevant in the field, trying to emphasise the importance of strategic language when it comes to human resources management. Concepts like “freedom of speech”, “politically correct language” or “non-discriminatory language” are brought to attention and analysed focusing on their importance during periods of change and uncertainty characterising the economic environment nowadays. Two trends are depicted in the paper: the first is that of the supporters of political correctness who attempt to homogenize the language and thought to enhance the self-esteem of minorities. One approach to reaching this goal is to eliminate discriminatory or offensive words and phrases and the substitutions of harmless vocabulary at the expense of economy, clarity, and logic. Another approach is to deconstruct a word or phrase into its component parts, treat the component parts as wholes, and focus on secondary meanings of the component parts. On the other hand, reflecting upon the nature of large-scale organizational restructuring, there are the critics arguing that this type of language is a euphemistic form of phraseology. The analysis starts with the assumption that the economic lexis is not a rigid system of terms. Morphologically, there is a high degree of variety in productive types of compounding which exceeds the possibilities that exist in the common English vocabulary. In this view, four buzzwords (rightsizing, downsizing, re-engineering, de-layering) have been chosen as representative for this process and, also, due to the difficulty of translating them into Romanian. Also, the etymology of these buzzwords is analysed and by this the paper attempts to find why managers have adopted these as their favourite terms when discussing large-scale organizational restructuring.

Keywords: buzzwords, rightsizing, downsizing, re-engineering, de-layering.

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1. Introduction

There are numerous researchers in the sociology of organizations and the study of social movements who have examined the strategic use of language. Whether it is called rhetoric (Suddaby and Greenwood 2005:35-67), or framing (Benford and Snow 2000:409-430), these studies have shown how language can be used to influence perceptions of events or practices, and that these perceptions can influence behaviour and actions. Metaphors especially are considered to be a very powerful tool in this process. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) stated: “The essence of a metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:5). Metaphors are used to elucidate an abstract or difficult concept by stating it in terms of a concept which is easier to relate to. The two authors go on showing how metaphors are used in everyday language to the point that they go undetected in people’s basic understanding of concepts. In all aspects of life, people define reality in terms of metaphors and then proceed to act on the basis of the metaphors. They draw inferences, set goals, make

commitments, and execute plans, all on the basis of how they in part structure their experience, consciously and unconsciously, by means of a metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:158).

Matissa Hollister considers that, in a related process, perceptions are influenced by the practice of naming or labelling, quoting Safford (2009): “People rely on these labels to figure out how to behave toward one another. So the power to shape the meaning and application of such labels lies at the heart of politics in both organizations and society more broadly. It’s something to be taken seriously”. (1)

The literature in the field shows that the use of strategic language is especially important during periods of change and uncertainty, when the new conditions and environment require new non-routine practices (Fiss and Hirsch 2005:29-52). In these conditions, strategic language can be used in order to accomplish the tasks associated to the job.

2. Non-discriminatory language or “politically correct” language

No society has ever permitted total freedom of speech without any restrictions whatsoever and it is hard to see how it could. In contemporary America and Britain there are a multitude of restraints on free speech. A large number of employers place restrictions on their employees’ freedom to speak about their work or to go to the press. These restrictions are usually presented as matters of respect for authority, or not bringing the company into dispute or just good manners, but they remain restrictions on freedom of speech nonetheless.

Recently, there have been attempts to broaden the concept of *non-discriminatory language* beyond its application to gender to consider traditional language that discriminates against people on the grounds of: race, ethnicity, religion, age, sexual orientation, physical ability or physical appearance. Hence, the phrase “politically correct” language was coined. The term “politically correct” appears to have originated within the left. Paul Berman states that: “‘Politically Correct’ was originally a phrase on the Leninist left to denote someone who steadfastly toed the party line. Then it evolved into ‘PC’, an ironic phrase among wised up leftists to denote someone whose line-toeing fervour was too much to bear. Only in connection with the PC debate itself did the phrase get picked up by people who had no fidelity to radicalism at all, but who relished the nasty syllables for their twist of irony” (Berman 1992:5).

In some critics’ opinion “political correctness” becomes ludicrous and self-parodying. For example, Beard and Cerf (1992) analyse terms such as *differently abled* (of a person confined to a wheelchair), *nonwaged* (unemployed), *physically challenged* (disabled), *vertically challenged* (short), *horizontally challenged*, *differently-sized*, *sizeism survivor* (fat), *cattle murderer* (grazier or rancher), *melanin-impooverished* (white), *sex worker* (prostitute), *unpaid sex worker* (wife), *achieve a deficiency* (fail), *member of a career-offender cartel* (mafioso), and *substance-abuse survivor with difficult-to-meet needs* (alcoholic serial killer) (Cerf and Beard 1992).

Modern dictionaries of euphemism like Ayto (1993) include politically correct expressions among their entries, considering that the phrase *politically correct* is completely mixed up with euphemism and jargon. In *Copy Editing for Professionals* (2000), Edmund Rooney and Oliver Witte define euphemisms as a “polite expression for an impolite idea.” They state: “Euphemisms are offenses against plain speech and clear communication, which is why bureaucrats and the politically correct love them... Perhaps those who have been fired from their jobs would be more accepting if they understood that they participated in the corporate *downsizing*. It didn’t take long for *downsizing* to acquire a bad name (*down* has an unfavourable connotation), so the term became *rightsizing*” (Apud Knight 2003:129).

Yet, contemporary studies on non-discriminatory language deny that the use of politically correct terms is euphemistic. They consider that the use of politically correct language calls for a more precise and accurate use of language.

3. Buzzwords

The word buzzword is a neologism coined in the 1960's. A buzzword is "a word or phrase... often authoritative or technical that is a vogue term in a particular profession, field study, [or] popular culture (Random House Dictionary). Yet, this definition essentially collapses buzzwords into jargon or argot. "Jargon" is a medieval word meaning gibberish. "Argot" means the languages of thieves and rogues. Nowadays, both terms have retained the pejorative meaning and they are used to criticize the secret codes of particular groups, especially of professions.

According to Kaufer and Carley (1984), buzzwords cannot provide detailed elaboration of what the buzzword strictly means. Unlike argot, a buzzword is "never a dense reference. A buzzword functions rather as an instrumental reference to topics that are only loosely connected to it" (Kaufer and Carley 1984:178). Buzzwords are the reality of the impact a specialised group has on the larger culture. Buzzwords are coined when the words of an inside community have implications for a larger community of outsiders, even when the outsiders cannot fully grasp the precise meanings of the words.

Specialised language is not a fixed set of terms. It evolves and renews itself according to the changing interests within communities of practice. According to Roos (1987), "the lexis of business and economics is characterised by a high degree of freedom, productivity, creativity and imagination" (Apud Crawford Camiciottoli 2007:138).

Redundancy and dismissal are one area of management practice that particularly suffers from euphemistic jargon. According to Redman and Wilkinson (2005), some of the terms managers use include: *building down, career alternative, enhancement program/career, re-appraisal, compressing, decruiting, de-hiring, dejobbing, de-layering, demassing, de-selection, disemploying, downscoping, downsizing, involuntary quit, lay-off, letting-go, non-retaining, outplacing, payroll adjustment, previously unrecognized recruitment errors, rationalizing, rebalancing, re-engineering, releasing, resizing, re-structuring, retrenchment, rightsizing, separation program, severance, slimming, streamlining, termination, volume-related production schedule, adjustment, wastage.* (2)

3.1 Business buzzwords: rightsizing, downsizing, re-engineering, de-layering

Rightsizing, downsizing, re-engineering or de-layering are "politically correct" terms relating to the planned reduction of programs or staff.

- My uncle was "dehired".
- John Taylor was "involuntarily separated" from the company.
- Alec Smith was "downsized".
- Jane Alexander was "de-recruited".

Yet, regardless of the name, these words should be thought of as a change process, to be implemented with the same thoughtful, systems approach as any other major organizational development initiative. Authors like Collins (2000) noted the damage that these words had upon lives and communities, bringing into attention the comparison that Moore (1997) made between radical, organizational restructuring initiatives and terrorism (Collins 2000:312).

Whatever the label, the tendency of companies to reduce their staff in response to an economic disaster affects their employees at all levels. It has been seen that "from banking to home appliances, industries are shedding jobs and eliminating excess capacity. And even when companies bulk up to compete globally, they're paring their work forces to hold down costs" (*Business Week* 1991: 88-89). *Business Week* (1992) also reported that "Since the mid-1980s, as corporations have responded to global competition and technological change by merging and consolidating, downsizing and de-layering, some 2 million middle management positions have been permanently eliminated" (*Business Week* 1992: 56-63).

"Downsizing," "rightsizing," or "re-engineering" represents the lean philosophy of American business today. An important indicator of the high degree of freedom characterising the lexis of

economics is word compounding, or the process of forming new words from two or more independent words. The words analysed in this paper are formed by extensive compounding:

- a. adjective + *ing*-verb: *right-sizing*, *down-sizing*
- b. prefix + *ing*-verb: *de-layering*, *re-engineering*.

a. Rightsizing

The first popular buzzword was *rightsizing*. It refers to reducing the total size of the people employed by the company to cut down on costs. Implicitly, there is the assumption that the company being downsized is essentially over-staffed and that performance levels can be maintained or even improved by reducing the number of the employees. *Rightsizing* is often used as a euphemism for *downsizing*, or *de-layering*, with the suggestion that it is not as far-reaching. This term was coined because many companies discovered that the people given voluntary retirement were performing useful functions which cannot be handled effectively by the remaining staff. Theoretically speaking, the term *rightsizing* implied that companies should determine and maintain only right employment for its requirements and increase their efficiency and reputation. (3)

b. Downsizing

The practice of downsizing and the use of the term *downsize* emerged in response to the economic crisis of the early 1980's. It marked an end to the social contract of long-term commitment between employers and workers and downsizing continues today, as showed by daily announcements of job reductions. Downsizing refers to the reduction of employment in an organization (McKinley, Zhao and Rust 2000:227-243). The label of "*downsizing*" played a role in the process in which the corporate players had to convince themselves and others that the practice was both effective and ethical. Using an implied metaphor helps both explain why the practice would work and reduce concerns about the moral questions. This buzzword is a "convenient, shorthand form of phrasing deployed to disguise the meaning and effects of recent organizational restructuring activities, which acts to distance management from responsibility for mass dismissal associated with organizational restructuring since the 1980s" (Collins 2000:282).

Downsizing is also commonly called *reorganizing*, *re-engineering*, *restructuring*, or *rightsizing*. Regardless of the label applied, however, downsizing essentially refers to layoffs that may or may not be accompanied by systematic restructuring programs, such as staff reductions, departmental consolidations, plant or office closings, or other forms of reducing payroll expenses. Matissa Hollister suggests three possible dimensions along which "downsizing" could differ from "lay off". The first dimension is related to people arguing that layoffs are just one of several tools used in downsizing for job reductions may also be achieved voluntary retirement. A second distinction between "downsizing" and "layoffs" refers to whether the job losses are temporary or permanent. Previously, layoffs used to refer to temporary dismissal from work because these were the most common types of job reductions. In what downsizing is concerned, when it was first introduced, the job losses were permanent. The third possible dimension is related to the fact that downsizing must involve specific intentions. (4)

Commonly, "downsizing" and "redundancy" are considered synonyms, linguistic alternatives conveying the same meaning. According to Collins (2000), this is not "quite accurate since where redundancy situations are associated with a decline in both employment and work, downsizing is associated with a reduction only in former" (Collins 2000:286). The same author argues that while the term "downsizing" is used to describe factors associated with the radical restructuring of the organization, the etymological origins of the term suggest a qualitatively different type of concern with "structures" and their "restructuring": "The term downsizing has its origins in the US automobile industry – particularly in Detroit – where it was used to encapsulate the driver to reduce car size and engine capacity in response to the oil crisis and the growth of environmental concerns during the early 1970's" (Collins 2000:286). In this view, the term "downsizing" might be considered as an effort, facilitated by euphemism, to accentuate key moments of downsizing,

moments of planning, strategy and the inevitable business outcomes of competitive imperatives, while downplaying other negative moments, months of uncertainty, hardship and enforced mobility within a changing system of work (Apud Collins, 2000:288).

c. Re-engineering

Re-engineering is the process of removing levels in the hierarchy. The purpose is to give the organization a flatter structure and thus the decision-making process is pushed down to lower managerial levels. The assumption is that this will produce quicker decision-making by managers who are closer to their customers and more in touch with their competitive environment. The studies show that the re-engineering concept is built on a previous eclectic collection of terms relating to competitive advantage. The metonym of the 1990's, "re-engineering" (Hammer and Champy 1993:32) or "strategic core re-organization" (Fairbrother 1991:69) has become executive rhetoric in both private and public organizations. At the end of the 20th century, the term *re-engineering* lost its appeal and the new terminology of *global sourcing* emerged (Kakabadse and Kakabadse 2000).

d. De-layering

The reasoning behind *de-layering* lies in the belief that as organizations grow, they become unmanageable, bureaucratic, and inflexible. More than that, they can be suffocated by rules and procedures, slow decision-making processes, and a lack of creativity. The solution is to flatten the structure (*de-layer*) to streamline the operations and increase flexibility and responsiveness to customers and competitors. *De-layering* is normally associated with other management initiatives, such as *Total Quality Management*, *business process re-engineering*, or *continuous improvement*. (5) *De-layering* has important consequences for managers because it invariably leads to job losses and, also, increases the number of tasks at work and responsibilities of lower-level managers. Even if it is accepted that some of the activities of middle management add little or no value and can be eliminated or contracted out, there are inevitably many aspects that will be passed down the hierarchy, which leads some commentators to suggest that many contemporary managers are now seriously overworked, although they may also be better paid.

4. Conclusions

Words are the primary means by which people communicate. Broadly conceived, political correctness includes a number of initiatives such as: altering vocabularies in order not to offend particular groups, affirmative action in admissions and hiring, and broadening the aim of classical texts to include those written by minority authors and women, not because of the quality of these texts but because they reflect minority realities. When words are eliminated from use due to political incorrectness, the options for conveying messages in the clearest and most accurate form are reduced. For the most part, the larger the vocabulary used by a sender and a receiver, the greater the opportunity to accurately transmit messages. Also, when certain terms are replaced with new words whose meanings are less well understood, the probability that the messages will be received as intended is reduced. Business relations in the new economy are completely different, therefore, the new rhetoric of organizations has included *flexibility*, *responsiveness*, *privatization*, *de-regulation*, *re-engineering*, *restructuring*, *de-layering*, *agility*, *quality service* and *global sourcing*, a rhetoric which reflects the rise of the network society, multi-layered governance and the new production of knowledge.

For a native speaker of Romanian who has acquired a partial command of English it might sometimes be difficult to judge whether a given politically correct expression is appropriate or not, or whether a given expression is funny or not. From a linguistic point of view political correctness seems to have no future either in English or in any other language because in spite of its highly inflective character in the past, in the last century English has shown a remarkable tendency towards economy.

Notes:

- (1) Apud Hollister, M., "Speaking of Downsizing. The use of the term 'downsizing' in American news media 1975-200", available at <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~socy/pdfs/HollisterSpeakingDownsizing.pdf>
- (2) *Idem, ibidem.*
- (3) "What is the difference between rightsizing and downsizing?" available at <http://www.enotes.com/business/q-and-a/rightsizing-downsizing-understanding-difference-114065>.
- (4) Hollister, M., "Speaking of Downsizing. The use of the term 'downsizing' in American news media 1975-200", available at <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~socy/pdfs/HollisterSpeakingDownsizing.pdf>
- (5) "Total Quality Management, business process re-engineering." Available at <http://www.jrank.org/business/pages/359/delayering.html>.

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2. “Downward mobility: Corporate castoffs are struggling just to stay in the middle-class.” *Business Week*, March 23rd, 1992.

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