

Wednesday, July 23, 2008

In So Many Words

By Nancy Schuman

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When the Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary released its 2008 entries in early July, I reviewed the dozens of new words to see if any were workforce related. Two caught my eye, as they are terms I hear regularly. The first, "mental health day," is one most of us can identify with—a day an employee takes off to relieve stress or renew vitality. It's also called vacation—I'm taking a few of those next week. The other word, "webinar," means a live online educational presentation. I've sat through a few of those. The real beauty is that the other participants can't see that you're chowing down lunch at your desk or cleaning out your pencil drawer while it's going on.

It seems to me that hot words come and go in business, as in fashion, and some are trendier than others. For instance, I feel that lately I'm being told to "take it offline," meaning that I'm bringing up issues that are not important at group meetings. I guess that's because some of the "corporati" (powerful business types) I'm hanging out with might be thinking, "Don't ask her, she's 404." What's that? Apparently, it means someone who is clueless, as in the Web error message "404 Not Found" (requested info couldn't be located).

Some words just sound better or more important than old ones. We used to "solve problems," now we "respond to challenges." In the past you "used your influence" on someone, now you "leverage your power." You had better keep up with these phrases, or your colleagues will think you're not operating on enough "bandwidth;" they want to work with people who are "innovative" and can "think outside the box."

Abbreviations are a whole other language. A marketing professional might think "TLA" means a "three-letter acronym," but a Gen Y worker might think it refers to "true love always." How many of us have family and friends who are addicted to their "CrackBerry"?—err, I mean BlackBerry.

I raised this issue of business jargon and workforce slang with Laura Winterroth, co-author of *Editor's Secrets: 10 Keys to Stronger Writing in 30 Minutes*, and also managing director of TD Consulting Group, which teaches business professionals how to improve their writing skills. In an e-mail, she notes, "Even five years ago, who would have anticipated that the word 'text' would become a verb? (OMG!) Or, that when we said we would 'Google' something, everyone would know what we meant? Turning nouns into verbs and phrases into acronyms gives people shortcuts so they can manage the frenzy of information swirling around them. The language purist may not be happy—and that's just my '.02'—but there's no stopping the innovation of hyperactive thumbs. The text-messaging prowess among younger workers today will no doubt lead to all types of new words."

I guess the real challenge in business has always been communication. Technology and timing dictate language. Yesterday's yuppies have become today's "woofies" (well-off older folks). Each generation needs to do its best to operate in "real time," so that it's always a "win-win" for everyone.

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