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# ‘Leverage.’ ‘Reach Out.’ ‘Circle Back.’ The Corporate Jargon We Hate the Most.

We pinged our readers for the terms that really annoy them. The list is long.

By [Demetria Gallegos](#) Following

Feb. 26, 2026 5:30 am ET



ROB DOBI FOR WSJ

An email arrived recently from our IT staff, alerting us to a “zero-day vulnerability” on our devices that would require an immediate update.

Yikes. What exactly did that mean? And was it as bad as it sounds?

So it goes with corporate jargon—words used in business that rely on buzzwords or forced phrases instead of plain, concrete speech. The idea is to sound professional or strategic, but more often it just sounds unclear. Or silly.

So we asked some thought leaders (WSJ readers), *What corporate jargon do you hate the most? Tell us the word or phrase and why it’s your pet peeve.*

It got pretty granular. Here are the terms they lashed out at, and why they find them so offensive.

**Bandwidth:** You're not a router, just say you're busy, pal!

I recall during an all-hands, the CEO announced the elimination of a quarterly planning meeting to “protect everyone’s bandwidth.” The freed-up two hours were immediately filled by: one new check-in meeting, three “bandwidth review” sessions to discuss how people were using their reclaimed bandwidth, and a mandatory survey about whether people felt less bandwidth-constrained. By week two, people had less bandwidth than before. The CEO sent a note: “Given current bandwidth constraints, we’ll discuss the bandwidth situation next quarter.”

— **Noa Khamallah**, *New York*

**Change agent:** This is how a former colleague describes himself on résumés.

While that might be an attractive descriptor to a company looking for an unemotional outsider to “change” (aka whack) half of an organization, it conjures for me someone on the midway at the fair wearing a money belt with pennies, nickels, dimes and quarters.

— **Jeff Houck**, *Tampa, Fla.*

**Circle back:** I asked someone to do some research and the response was “I’ll check it out and circle back to you.” Why couldn’t they say, “OK, I’ll send you my results” or “I will follow up on that”?

— **John Olaynick**, *West Palm Beach, Fla.*

**Decision tree:** As in, “Let’s reach up into our decision tree.” It’s just stupid!

— **Karolina Nilsson**, *London*

**Decisioning:** It's a pointless invention to give gravitas to the notion that action or choices should follow. For example, "This is a decisioning meeting." It's completely unnecessary, a misplaced effort to sound more important rather than to do some "real work" and—I don't know—make a decision?

— **Yang He**, *Los Angeles*

**Deep dive:** Every time I hear some C-Suite type utter the dreaded "deep dive," I want to respond, "Oh, really? Not investigate, study, discern, discover, find out about, look into? You had to go with deep dive? Did everyone go to the same M.B.A. program?"

— **John Lydon**, *Jacksonville, Fla.*

**Growth mindset:** Used mainly as an ambiguous way of describing (or asking for) ambition, it has become a useful tool for senior management to encourage junior employees to improve their performance, without committing to specifics that might lead to a promotion or pay raise.

I experienced this at the hands of a former boss, who, having made the mistake of promising me a pay raise that wasn't in their power to deliver, resorted to urging a greater growth mindset in every subsequent performance review. A totally unmeasurable goal and thus forever out of reach!

— **George Baggaley**, *London*

**Hard stop:** I used to participate on a weekly call with several of my peers from different departments, all of whom, I estimate, were equally busy and crunched for time. The call was scheduled for one hour. But one person had a propensity to announce to everyone at the beginning of the call that she had a "hard stop" at 2 p.m., so we had to wrap up by that time. It came across as her believing she was busier and more important than anyone else on the call.

— **Scott Knode**, *Leakey, Texas*

**Hit the ground running:** Early in my career as a new-employee trainer, I witnessed a manager tell this to a group of new hires on their first day, at the start of the onboarding process. They still had hours of meetings and orientation. They had shown up excited and smiling. As soon as they heard those words from the manager, I watched their body language immediately shift from excitement to visible tension.

Later that day, one of the trainees asked me whether they were already behind schedule. It was a lightbulb moment for me: The employee had heard “hit the ground running” not as “be proactive in your training”—which is how the manager meant it—but as “you are already late in learning the job.”

I passed the feedback along to this manager to speak with more clarity, especially with anxious and easily confused new employees.

— **Ana Goehner**, *Cary, N.C.*

**Juice isn't worth the squeeze:** I hear this so much every day you'd think I was working at Tropicana. At least they aren't saying “ROI,” I guess?

— **Kim Peterson**, *Vienna, Va.*

**Lean in:** Lean in to what? Are you dancing the Macarena?

I liked the phrase when I first heard it a few years back and when it's used in the context of committing to a strategy or a new initiative. But lately it's used for routine tasks such as “I'm leaning in to finish payroll” or “I'm going to lean in and have lunch.” C'mon!

— **Mike O'Malley**, *Nashville, Tenn.*

**Let's take this offline:** No, let's discuss it now! Or, if you really want to talk about it later, how about you just say *that* instead? *We are* offline right now, we're in a conference room. So what do you mean?

I have one colleague who loves to use that expression when the discussion is heating up. But it's often an issue that needs to be resolved and is a primary purpose for the

meeting in the first place. He has used it when we're the only two people in the meeting. Perhaps people who use it are underprepared for confrontation and want to avoid disagreement at any cost.

— **Michael Moore**, *Portland, Ore.*

**Leverage:** When did this become a thing? “We can leverage the existing PowerPoint deck,” for example.

Or maybe we could just use it?

— **Joan Cook**, *Trenton, N.J.*

**Move the needle:** Ugh. I want to vomit every time I hear this phrase. It does not give you corporate cred. Those of us who heard you are mocking you behind your back on Slack.

— **Madison Zalk**, *Seattle*

**Negative growth:** This one is tough to beat. Analysts like to say, “All quarters were good for Acme Widgets, except for Q3, when they experienced negative growth in revenue.”

— **Greg Summy**, *Virginia Beach, Va.*

**Piggyback:** As in, “I just want to piggyback on his comment.” I can't begin to describe the agony in hearing this line. We can do better than using elementary language, particularly in a corporate setting. I fear we need to read more to build a deeper lexicon.

— **Hiral Patel**, *St. Louis*

**Pivot:** Usually said by someone who does not want to tell their superior they disagree with their strategy or when a project is going horribly wrong. For example, “John, I really like what you are proposing, but maybe we should pivot and consider outsourcing our production.”

— **Ken D’Amato**, *Boca Raton, Fla.*

**Probabilistic:** In the marketing world, there is “probabilistic” targeting of customers. It means probable, but someone had to make it sound fancy and almost impossible to pronounce. Every time, I want to stop them and tell them to just say “probable.”

— **Chris Peterson**, *Milan*

**Put a pin in that:** This, along with “Let’s double-click on that,” is just silly speak.

My exposure to this all stems from being around salespeople who were not competent and didn’t have a clue in how to sell, so they fell back on trite sayings. They would call to “touch base” which was simply an excuse to talk without genuine purpose with hopes of learning something about a sale in process. It offers zero value to the person you are selling and talking to!

— **Mark Hilborn**, *Orlando, Fla.*

**Reach out:** This phrase sounds so overblown. “Reach out to Bob in accounting” seems to imply some level of difficulty, like you’re trying to get a personal reply from Taylor Swift or something, when it may just be a matter of walking up to Bob’s cubicle on the other side of the building.

In short, if you’re not AT&T (“Reach out and touch someone”) or Neil Diamond (“reachin’ out, touchin’ me, touchin’ you”) please do not ask me to “reach out” to anyone.

— **George Lane**, *Atlanta*

**Socialize:** To share an idea or proposal with key decisionmakers in order to solicit feedback and gain approval or buy-in to make a decision.

Example: “Thanks for sending this proposal. We will socialize and revert” which means, in plain English, “We’ll run it up the chain of command to see if we can get it approved, and then get back to you with the decision or additional comments.”

— **Allison Shapira**, *Washington*

**Soup to nuts:** This phrase is a non-value-add in most cases as we can tell from the context of the statement something is being looked at or redone completely. Its use is distracting in the moment.

Besides, I can’t remember the last time I got nuts at the end of a restaurant dinner. If a restaurant analogy is to be used, perhaps it should be “heavily alcoholic cocktail to overpriced bill.”

— **Greg Fontana**, *Santa Rosa, Calif.*

**Space:** The equity space. The beauty-supply space. The intellectual-property space. The media space.

They’re not spaces, they’re sectors or industries. Spaces are well-defined and venerable terms in physics and math. If you don’t know what “phase space” or “vector space” is, then stay away! And if you do know, then don’t consign “space” to jargon space.

— **Eric J. Bruskin**, *Middletown Township, Pa.*

**Stakeholders:** It makes me think of vampire slayers.

— **Diana Matthews**, *Whiteville, N.C.*

**Take a 10,000-foot view:** I hate when people use this phrase to mean taking a look at a situation or project more broadly. I don't know the number of feet from which I'm looking at something to start with, so I don't know what it would look like to view it from 10,000 feet. If you want me to forget about the details for the time being, just say that!

— **Emily Muhlberg**, *Austin, Texas*

**Thought leadership:** This isn't a term that most of us would use, even in semiformal conversation. Either "research" or "analysis" is easier to understand quickly, which should be the goal. Thought leadership, on the other hand, implies that we can create and lead a hive mind like the Borg from "Star Trek."

— **Kris Hudson**, *Grand Prairie, Texas*

**Unpack that:** In other words: Deal with it now. It's so overly consultant-speak cringey that I can clearly picture a corporate off-site meeting about to go into breakout sessions. The consultant is at the front of the room with a flip-chart indicating tabletop topics and instructions. Ugh, pure torture.

— **Marianne Watson**, *San Antonio*

**Utilize:** I teach new writers to avoid utilize except in a "MacGyver"-like case, when something is used for a purpose it wasn't originally intended, "I utilized a gum wrapper and a paper clip to unlock the door."

Everything else is "use."

— **Julie Ferris-Tillman**, *Milwaukee*

*Appeared in the March 2, 2026, print edition as "Leverage." "Reach Out." "Circle Back." The Corporate Jargon We Hate the Most.'*

Demetria Gallegos is part of the Journal Reports team. Coverage areas include leadership, small business, wealth management, personal finance, retirement, health, technology, energy and WSJ's College Rankings. Previously, she wrote "The Juggle on Sunday," a column about family finances. Prior...



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