Silicon Valley's Least Favorite Buzzwords

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Buzzwords often tap into the cultural zeitgeist of a time, connecting to trends or new technologies that feel especially relevant for the moment. They are popular, and in that sense powerful, even if there's not a strong connection between their usefulness and their popularity. Even worse, many buzzwords become cliche and over-used, losing their initial power and becoming downright annoying. With its endless stream of investor pitches and company pep talks, Silicon Valley is overrun with buzzwords.

Working in tech forces you to stay one step ahead of the game and, as a writer, you've got to know when a word falls out of favor. When I'm not writing or answering emails, I spend most of my days in meetings talking and listening about business and tech, which forces me to take notice of the ebb and flow of popular jargon. Importantly, I notice which words people are not using anymore or actively avoiding for various reasons.

My own desire to understand which buzzwords to banish led me to collect Silicon Valley's least favorite buzzwords. After speaking with a few dozen entrepreneurs, technologists, writers and venture capitalists, I found that there are four words that came up the most when I asked the question: What are your least favorite startup-related buzzwords?

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‘Platform’

I remember being in college describing an app I was working on to my father. He interrupted me, saying, “Don’t call it a platform. If everything is a platform, then the word is meaningless. Be specific with what your product is.”

Everywhere you look, a startup is describing itself as some kind of “platform.” Thanks to its ubiquitousness, nobody really knows what the word means anymore. If you tell me that you run a mental-health platform, I will have a vague idea of what you are talking about, but I will have no idea of what your company actually does.

The reason for this confusion is that “platform” is increasingly misused in the tech industry and the business world at large. I would venture to say that 90% of the entrepreneurs who describe their companies or products as “platforms” are just using it as a catch-all term. Today, the term is as vague as it is in the physical world; almost any structure can be a platform, and the same is true in tech.

‘Synergy’

Some would argue that “synergy” was already a disliked relic of the 1990s, but it has made a comeback in recent years. It’s effectively just the buzzword equivalent of collaboration, teamwork, a suggestion of partnership or, for the academics and philosophers among us, a dialectic. However, like a lot of business jargon, it is meant to combine the meanings of multiple words into a quick, easily digestible, attention-grabbing term. Unfortunately, when people throw synergy into conversations without it really enhancing their message in any substantive way, it comes off as a vague word used lazily to express an interest in collaboration.

‘Paradigm’

Though all four of these words are not well-liked in Silicon Valley, “paradigm” might be the most hated. It is usually used in the context of a “paradigm shift,” indicating that a company, product, service or individual can bring about widespread change to existing processes, beliefs or systems. “Paradigm” became the dramatic buzzword that enthusiastic entrepreneurs and techies have used (and overused) to describe the capacity to bring about Earth-shattering improvements to things that we have come to accept as normal because most early builders believe they’ll be able to change the world.

The vitriol toward “paradigm” and “paradigm shift” likely stems from their association with hyperbole. The truth is that most businesses, products, services or individuals will not drastically change life as we know it.

The next time someone comes to you to talk about a company that wants to create a “paradigm shift” in their industry, ask them to get specific. Execution is everything, and paradigm shifters are few and far between.

‘Disruption’

Among the professionals with whom I spoke, “paradigm shift” and “disruption” were often lumped together as the most disliked terms. This is because they often point to similar intentions. If someone wants you to believe that their company is going to fundamentally change the way something is done and completely outsmart the giants of the tech industry, that’s fine and well, but you should aim to use descriptors that leave the listening party thinking you have a game-changer. As the builder, it’s best to not actually say it yourself.

When you start to hear or read this term in every pitch, PR campaign or even staff meeting, it begins to lose its luster.

Not everything can be a disruption to the status quo. There’s a reason the status quo exists — because it is notoriously difficult to disrupt. For every real disruption in Silicon Valley (and the tech industry more broadly), there are a thousand wannabe disruptors waiting in the wings.

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In a culture where a new billion-dollar idea is born weekly, it can be easy to get overzealous with empty words that are meant to entice, excite and grab people’s attention. Buzzwords are an addicting shortcut, but after a while, hearing the same catchphrases in every pitch, team meeting or interview can get really old.

Sounding out of touch and out of date is a sure-fire way to lose credibility in the constantly evolving world of tech. Be specific with what you’re saying, and be intentional with the words you choose.

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