

On the Origin of Meaning

The IT sector, like most other industries, is awash with technical jargon, terminology, acronyms and abbreviations that have very specific meanings. More than most other major industries, however, TechSpeak - the language of IT people - is regularly co-opted into the language of the everyday. This is an inevitable consequence of our increasingly networked, IT-driven world; but often there is a disconnect between the way we discuss technologies and the benefits they can bring; how they are designed to be used; and how we actually use them.

The Power of Words

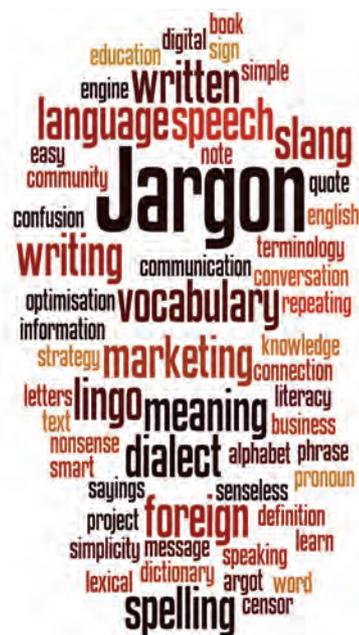
As an IT software provider developing products specifically for the international liner shipping and port agency markets, at Softship we have seen how IT jargon has entered into the maritime conversation in a swarm of buzzwords. The challenge from our perspective, is that across the maritime industry this very technical IT language is frequently used in a way that creates a disconnect between the IT department and the rest of the business (wittingly, or otherwise).

Buzzwords are increasingly being used to pepper presentations about big-picture trends ('digitalization'), technologies ('blockchain') or threats ('digital disruption'), without delving into what these terms actually mean for the end-user – the employee or decision maker within a shipping company.

While it is of course a good thing that IT and software solutions are being discussed across the board, the issue is that complex IT processes, tools and products are being talked about without adequate exploration of their context and specific application. It is problematic because these words are often used as short-hand expressions, which are not being explained to decision-makers in a way that clearly showcases the benefits of their application to an organisations' ability to benefit from their use.

Missing the Point

In other words, IT is increasingly being talked about in abstract terms, rather than as tangible tools for aiding business efficiency and performance. The net result is that shipping companies are lagging far behind in their uptake of technologies that can help them to compete.



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It is for this reason that we are increasingly seeing shipping companies failing to adopt (often very simple technologies) that can help their end users – their employees, customers or suppliers. This is particularly true when the solution to their problem does not conveniently fit within the parameters of a buzzword.

For example, simple online platforms can now offer the same level of support, the same functionality and processes as an intranet-based software package which can only be used on networked computers within an office. The switch to the new technology is relatively simple, and can incorporate all of the legacy data and information from the older system, which many decision makers fear having to leave behind. But because these technologies are being referred to as 'cloud-based big-data solutions', they are often dismissed as being a security risk without adequate investigation.

Polarizing Language

When the conversation about IT developments takes place with little regard for how technologies are designed to actually be used and the tangible benefits they can bring, there is naturally cause for confusion. It is important therefore, that the IT and software solutions providers speak up, and correct the tone. They should step towards the parapet to explain properly, in specific detail and in layman's terms, how they intend these technologies to be used day-to-day. In practical terms, this means talking di-

rectly to end users, taking the time to explain the minutia and working closely with the people who are intended to benefit from the digitalisation of shipping services to ensure that they get the most out of these solutions.

This is not to say that there is no appetite for newer digital technologies or IT solutions across the maritime industry. But there is a reluctance to act as an early-adopter, or to implement technologies or solutions that work specifically for an individual business. Importantly, shipping companies are often adopting technologies in a piecemeal approach – electing for 'add-on's to small problems rather than a comprehensive, integrated solution built for their business and operations.

Bridging the Divide

This makes the integration of digital solutions with their existing platforms and processes of working a significant problem, with a web of peripheral and transient programmes used without control, standardisation or secure archiving capabilities. It is only through integrating software that shipping companies can achieve the efficiency benefits these products have the potential to provide. Digitalisation without integration in today's world is the equivalent of having a smart TV, but no home WIFI. You have the tools, but you are not using them properly.

To give an example, all shipping companies will operate an accounting package to handle receivables, payables, ledgers, reporting and other day-to-day book-keeping requirements. Similarly, most will also operate systems to handle the commercial requirements from quote to cash. But we frequently come across companies that have breaks in their commercial and accounting processes, where information is not flowing seamlessly between applications and where certain jobs are done manually. This lack of integration creates friction in the workplace, duplication of process and also encourages "silo" working.

Digital Integration

Integration of the separate systems into a combined solution will allow the tariffing system to capture all the complex agreements relating to individual customers and – a hugely complicated ma-



About the Author

Lars Fischer is Managing Director of German shipping IT provider Softship Data Processing Ltd, Singapore, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Softship AG, the leading provider of software solutions to the international shipping sector.

trix of prices, restrictions, incentives and discounts. When a quotation is requested by a customer, it an integrated system that allows the quotation system to automatically look-up the relevant rates and create an accurate and individualised quotation. When the quotation turns into a sale, it is the integrated system that will create the required booking, bill of lading, invoice, manifest and everything else required.

This is precisely what Softship's software solutions do. Liner carriers, for example, can use our LIMA software, by buying the components of the system that they require. We then work closely with these clients to integrate their existing programmes or data management processes into one system in order to avoid duplication of work, increase visibility and control and enable them to provide a better service for their customers.

A More Positive Path

Just as there is a linguistic divide between what is said and what is meant with software solutions in the maritime space, there is often also a fundamental disconnect between the integration of new technologies and existing ways of working. It is in this sense that digital solutions may actually prove to be 'disruptive' to a shipping business; but they need not be. To overcome these problems, of perception and integration, shipping companies should turn to the technology providers. It is through working collaboratively, in an integrated way, that shipping companies can truly benefit from the digital solutions designed to enhance their businesses and support their employees and clients.