



City Research Online

City St George's, University of London

Citation: Spicer, A. (2017). Introduction. In: Spicer, A. (Ed.), Business Bullshit. (pp. 1-21). Abingdon, UK: Routledge. ISBN 1317433289

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version. To cite this item please consult the publisher's version.

Permanent repository link: <https://city-ref-test.eprints-hosting.org/id/eprint/19644/>

Copyright and Reuse: Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, unless otherwise indicated, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way. For full details of reuse please refer to [City Research Online policy](#).

Chapter One

Introduction

Kroned

A young man wearing a tuxedo walks across a ball room. Around him are traces of festivities which have run their course: balloons, empty glasses, confetti. On the 1st of January 1984, this image appeared throughout the U.S. Next to this image were the words: 'The Party's Over'. This was advertisement taken out by A.T.&T., the largest public utility in the U.S at the time. On this New Years Day, A.T.&T. had been broken up. All its' subsidiaries faced a new world where a cosy monopoly was replaced by the rigours of competition.

One of the subsidiaries facing this new competitive environment was Pacific Bell. No longer did it hold a virtual monopoly over California's telephone infrastructure. The management team was under pressure to overhaul the company, so they did all the things managers usually do: restructuring, downsizing, rebranding, and financial re-engineering. But one of the most significant concerns of Pacific Bell executives was that they did not have the right culture. They were worried their employees did not understand 'the profit concept', they did not 'take ownership', and they were not 'entrepreneurial'.

To address these perceived shortcomings, the Pacific Bell executives decide it was not just their balance sheet that needed an overhaul – their employees needed to be overhauled as well. To do this, the company employed a well known organizational development specialist called Charles Krone. Mr Krone set about designing a management training programme which promised to transform the way people thought, acted and talked. By passing through this training course, senior managers hoped that their underlings would be elevated to new levels of consciousness and their company would be unleashed to compete in this new world.

The training programme Mr Krone devised contained many of the well-worn standards you would expect: how to run an effective meeting, structured methods for dealing with business problems, space to discuss practical problems which employees faced. But all this vanilla management training was packaged in a rather bizarre wrapper: the thought of a 20th century Russian mystic named George Gurdjieff.

According to Gurdjieff, most of us spend our days mired in 'waking sleep'. We automatically respond and don't reach 'higher states of consciousness'. This means we are unable to see more profound truths. To break free from this torpor we need to engage in what Gurdjieff called 'the work'. This involved a programme of activity which moved participants from automatic action to transcendence. The focus of 'the work' is one's own self. Through his self-work of undermining ingrained habits of thinking, Gurdjieff claimed it was possible to liberate your own inner potential and see profound truths.

Originally Gurdjieff's ideas appealed to artists, intellectuals and free thinkers. People like the writer Katherine Mansfield, the architect Frank Lloyd Wright and the psychonaut Timothy Leary were all influenced by his ideas. Followers of Gurdieff would engage in 'the work' through sacred dance, listening to music (some of it composed by Gurdjieff himself), group discussions and other activities designed to lift you to higher states of consciousness.

By the 1980s, Gurdjieff's mystical ideas had found a resonance in the rather strange setting of a large Californian utilities company. Clearly, the executives of Pacific Bell found that 'the work' spoke to them. Perhaps they assumed the problem with their employees is they spent their days at work in a state of waking sleep. This was all about to change. All 70,000 employees of Pacific Bell were to be helped along a journey to a higher state of consciousness with the aid of management training designed by Charles Krone.

In a programme that came to be known as 'Kroning', employees were taken through ten two-day sessions where about seventy people would come together to be instructed about new concepts such as 'the law of three' (a 'thinking framework that helps us identify the quality of mental energy we have of want to exert towards something'). After this, they would form small groups and discuss broad questions like 'what is the difference between knowledge and understanding'.

After going through the programme, employees had an impressive new vocabulary, which came to be known as Kronese. They talked about 'alignment', 'end-state visions', 'paths forward', 'purposefulness' and 'intentionality'. This new vocabulary was presumably designed to shake employees awake from their bureaucratic doze, and open their eyes to a new higher level consciousness. And some did indeed feel like their ability to get things done had improved. However, there were some unfortunate side effects of this heightened corporate consciousness. To start with, Kronese made it almost impossible for outsiders to understand what was actually going on in the company. One former employee pointed out that she could "remember periodically having outsiders in a meeting and they absolutely could not follow a meeting held in Krone." As well as making the company illegible to the un-Kroned, the new language "led to a lot more meetings. Everything took twice as long". The sheer amount of time wasted nurturing their new found states of higher consciousness led this employee to speculate that "If the energy that had been put into Krone had been put to the business at hand, we all would have gotten a lot more done."

Although Kroning was packaged in new age language of psychic liberation, it was backed by all the threats of an authoritarian corporation. Many employees felt like they were under undue pressure to buy into Kroning. For instance, one manager was summoned to her superior's office after a team members walked out of a Kroning session. She was asked to 'force out or retire' the rebellious employee. Another employee explained how "it was made clear that any opposition to the training or any complaints would affect your future. If you didn't go along, you were made to look stupid or threatened". You had to wake up, or else!

Kroning did not come cheaply. The programme cost \$40 million in 1987 alone. This high price tag in conjunction with public concerns about the authoritarian nature of the programme and the rather strange new-age tone of the whole thing prompted California's Public Utility Commission to undertake an inquiry into the leadership development programme. They concluded that the programme had many good basic features, but that it was too expensive. As a result, Pacific Bell called a halt to Kroning, and introduced a more traditional management development techniques.

Kroning may seem to be one of the many examples of costly and ill-calculated misadventures which are so common in corporate life. Although it seems to have been largely forgotten, its legacy lives on today in offices around the world. If we return to the kind of language which seemed so strange to employees at Pacific Bell, we notice it seems all too familiar today. 'Allignment', 'paths forward', 'end state visions' and 'purposefulness' seemed like class-A corporate gobbledygook in 1987. Today, these phrases are among the most benign specimens of the vacuous language circulating in the emails and meeting rooms of corporations, government agencies and NGOs. Kronese like 'intentionality' sounds positively sensible when compared to 'ideation', 'imagineering', 'issue scanning', 'inboxing' and 'impactfulness'. Although Kroning may have been killed off, Kronese has lived in on. In fact the indecipherable management speak which Charles Krone was an early proponent of has only gone from strength to strength.

But a second hidden legacy of Kroning can be found in offices around the world. If you look carefully in the pastel coloured cubicles or forlorn staff notice boards of any workplace, you are likely to find something which is a memento to the deep psychological wounds of being Kroned. Among the yellowing safety notices and out-of-date advertising for fund raisers you are likely to find a cartoon featuring an schulmpy engineer called Dilbert and his evil boss called Dogbert. Seemingly drawn using an office computer during the meaningless hours spent at work, these cartoons capture in mercifully short scenes the repetitive tragedies of office life – pointless buzzwords, wasted restructuring exercises, repeated outsourcing and endemic insecurity. The

universe depicted by the cartoon's creator Scott Adams could be anywhere – the (non)action takes place in some unidentifiable (non)place on the edge of an office park in the middle of suburban nowheresville. These scenes of existential loathing in the office have proved to be wildly popular throughout the world. They say something about contemporary office life and its endless emptiness that no management book can capture. The question of course is where did this bleak vision of the workplace come from? What prompted Adams to sketch up such a sad universe? The answer, of course, is office life itself. Adams experienced the cubicle life first hand. Adams worked for Pacific Bell as a programmer when Kroning was in full swing. He did not leave the company until 1995.

A bio-break from Boiling the Ocean

“We have the freedom to act and innovate to meet our customers' needs as though each of us owned the business. Strategy guides our direction; sound judgment guides our daily execution. We take prudent risks and are each accountable for our actions”

'Freedom', 'act', 'innovate', 'customers' needs', 'strategy', 'daily execution', 'accountable'. Empty words you could heard anywhere, used by anyone, to talk about anything. Is this a medical director in Huston who is under pressure to improve patient safety? Or the manager of a child care centre in Auckland who needs to cut costs? Maybe it is a factory boss in Munich who wants to introduce a new product line? A politician in Mumbai who wants to win a few extra votes?

These words which are so familiar to us today, were actually strange when they were written down and pasted up on every public space as part of the strategy statement at Pacific Bell corporation in the late 1980s. This jargon replaced a relatively straight forward statement of what the organisation did - provide utilities like phone services to Californians. Such drab operational statements were not seen as ambitious enough. Executives at the company were clear trying to create a transcendental purpose. And to achieve this, they did not engage in mystic chanting, sacred dancing, or encounter groups as Gruijjeff's follows might have. Rather, PacBell executives turned to the mystical language of the mission statement.

Pacific Bell and its Kronese may have seemed strange in 1987. Today, organizations around the world are awash with such management speak. Many millions readily use these terms to talk about everything from educating children to running nuclear power plants. It has become a kind of organisational lingua franca. These terms are swapped between middle managers as free masons used secret handshakes to indicate their membership and status. This not so-secret language echoes across the cubicled landscape. It is the beige back-drop to modern office life. It seems to be everywhere and refer to everything. Yet it also has no origins, no history, no author, and no real believers.

Rolling out bleeding edge innovation; Going forward by getting granular; taking a helicopter view to doing some blue sky thinking; circling back before close of play; proactively pushing the envelope; reaching out to get on the radar; taking a bio-break to avoid boiling the ocean; doing the no-brainer by picking those low hanging fruit; synergising some sunseting; having a cold eyed review of core competencies; diarizing some drilling down; thought leaders touching base in town hall meetings; having your human capital do some horizion scanning; benchmarking best practice. Unintelligible to the uninitiated, but all too familiar to those who are unfortunately enough to be exposed to this kind of piffle every day of their working lives. This is business bullshit.

Artisinal Bullshit, Industrial Bullshit

Bullshit is not the same thing as a lie. To lie, you need to have some respect for the truth. When you lie you are trying to cover something up. The liar knows they might be found out. They know there is a truth, and that they are on the wrong side of it. Bullshit is another matter altogether. According to the Princeton philosopher Harry Frankfurt, the bullshitter has 'a lack of connection or concern for

the truth' and a remarkable 'indifference to how things really are'.¹ The bullshitter does not lie. They don't try to cover up the gap between what they are saying and how things really are. The bullshitter is indifferent to how things really are. They don't care about whether their claims conflict with reality. The bullshitter is not concerned that their grand pronouncements might be illogical, unintelligible and down right baffling. All they care about is whether people will listen

While liars can go to elaborate lengths to cover up, the bullshitter unashamedly puts it out there for everyone to see. And what's more, bullshitters consider their handy-work to be an art form. Like any good artist, they long for an appreciative audience. The more accomplished bullshit artists expect applause, awards and significant recompense for their masterpieces.

When he wrote his essay on the topic in 1986, Harry Frankfurt was concerned about what he saw as the bullshit which had infiltrated philosophy at the time. He was particularly worried about the concept of 'authenticity'. While Frankfurt's focus was a small professional community, his message seemed to have far greater resonance. When his short essay was republished as a pamphlet, it immediately shot to the top of the New York Times best seller list – and stayed there for months. It sparked a flood of responses from those who recognised the kind of bullshit Frankfurt found among contemporary philosophers in their own lives.

If you just sniff a little you can smell the bullshit in nearly every aspect of everyday life. One fascinating example is the 'bullshitting sessions' where men gather together to drink and 'shoot the shit'. Common topics include sports, friends, family and figures of authority

In her ethnographic study of social interaction in English pubs, Kate Fox found that the kind of loose talk which frequently took place around the bar was not about expressing the truth or what you believed in.² During a bullshit session at the pub you are allowed to say things you did not believe in. A pub argument is simply a game, and the first rule of the game is that you should not take anything too seriously. During these exchanges, over-the-top, illogical and unsubstantiated claims are not just tolerated – they are rewarded. Free association and unclear lines of reasoning are common as people dart from the characteristic of a tennis player to the qualities of a weed killer within the space of a few minutes. Statements which bare no relationship to reality are frequent. Indeed, during these bullshit sessions, men will often aim to out-bullshit their interlocutors. The sole aim is to be impressing, amusing and to pass the time. Telling the truth is often a boring downer which prompts others at the bar to stare into their beer for a few moments and then start a new conversation about an entirely different topic.

This kind of hand crafted bullshit which can be found in almost any pub in England seems to be harmless, and even charming. It helps to fertilise social relationships in the face of deep rooted social anxieties. It enables Englishmen gathered at a bar together to speak with each other without revealing anything too personal. In the U.S., bullshit sessions are a place where friends can vigorously compete with each other while not lapsing into outright hostility. A careful look at any society will identify a space where these bullshit sessions flourish. It will also show up the particular societal anxieties they help to defang.

Relatively intimate spaces like the English pub or the North American poker game are by no means the only places where you will find bullshit today. However, this kind of artisan bullshit has become increasingly rare. The culprit is the industrialisation of bullshit. No longer are exaggerations and empty talk hand crafted by self taught masters who have honed their art for many years at the neighbourhood pub. Now, empty and meaningless talk is manufactured on a truly mass scale. During the 19th century, we developed systems for the mass production, distribution and consumption of goods. In the 20th century, services were also industrialised. In the 21st century, bullshit has been industrialised.

1 Harry Frankfurt. *On Bullshit*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006). p.33-34.

2 Kate Fox. *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behavior* Revised and Updated. (London, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2014).

With few growth prospects, many developed western economies have turned to bullshit as a source of prosperity. A cursory analysis of growing sectors in the west will suggest that those areas which have the greatest scope for bullshit production have also been the ones which have grown most rapidly. One study found that the 'economy of persuasion' (a more polite word for the bullshit economy) accounts for 25% of the US economy.³ A recent update on this by the Australian Treasury revised the number upwards to 30%.⁴

So who exactly are all these bullshitters? There are clearly some sectors from which the stench is overwhelming. In her analysis of the flood of bullshit in contemporary life, Laura Penny identifies some sectors which are particular bullshit intensive.⁵ One leading sector of bullshit production is politics. In this sector well-honed skills at dodging anything that looks like a passing reference to the truth are exquisitely well developed. 'Politicians are among the first people to tell you that politicians are full of shit', Penny points out, 'Nobody seems more delighted to describe, in exquisite detail, just how corrupt government is than someone who happens to be running for it, or an elected member of it'.⁶ Being so self-aware of their bullshit production, politicians seem to be feel encouraged to create a constant river of bullshit. A sample of some recent policy buzzwords, may give you a sense of this: 'enterprise culture', 'the third way', 'connected government', 'the big society', 'open democracy', 'nudging'. All these concepts were so hotly contested and keenly coveted at the time. But all of them have been quickly flushed down the drain of history, only to be replaced by another relatively similar sounding concept. During the past few years bullshit production in politics has undergone a step change. Well known examples include Silvio Berlusconi's trademark empty rhetoric, Vladimir Putin's skilful reconstruction of the Russian media into a 'hall of mirrors', patently false claims used by those campaigning for Britain to leave the European Union, and Donald Trump's empty rhetoric.⁷ Many commentators have called this approach post-truth politics.⁸ This is a politics based on the appeal to emotion rather than evidence and reason. It is a politics where experts are denigrated and fact are seen as irrelevant. According to Laurie Penny, a central aspect of post-truth politics is bullshit.⁹

Then there is the advertising and public relations agencies who have made a multi-billion dollar business out of what Penny describes as 'making shit up'. Indeed, insiders quite readily acknowledge that their field is mired in bullshit. In advertising there is also an inbuilt acknowledgement that what is produced is bullshit. 'Open happiness' (Coke), 'i'm lovin' it' (McDonalds), 'travel should take you place' (Hilton), 'live your life' (American Eagle Outfitters), 'what can brown do for you' (UPS), 'Because i'm worth it' (L'Oréal), and 'Believe in Better' (Sky). All these corporate slogans were undoubtedly cooked up with great expense by a well-known communications agency. On one level, they are finely crafted pieces of banality. On another, they are masterful exercises of flagrant bullshit artistry.

Of course there are many other fields which are mired in bullshit: There is media, with its pseudo celebrities and empty chatter. There are sports, with its stunning empty commentary, masterful circumlocutions and ongoing stream of pointless statistics. There is the technology world with its fondness for claiming even the most idiotic incremental innovation is going to 'change everything'. But if there is one sector which has mass produced the most impressive examples of bullshit today, it is likely to be the field of management.

Fashionable Jargon

³ Donald McCloskey and Arjo Klamer, 'One quarter of GDP is persuasion' *The American Economic Review*, 85, 2 (1995): p. 191-195.

⁴ Gerry Antioch, 'Persuasion is now 30% of US GDP', *Economics Round-up*, 1 (2013).

⁵ Laura Penny, *Your call is important to us: The truth about bullshit*. (New York, Crown, 2010).

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Joris Luyendijk, *On Trump, Brexit and Bullshit*. (London: Profile, 2017).

⁸ Peter Pomerantsev, 'Why we're post fact', *Granta*, 18 July (2016).

⁹ Laurie Penny, 'Why in the post truth world, the bullshitters are winning', *New Statesman*, 6 January, (2017).

'Among the most spirit-sapping indignities of modern office life is the relentless battering of workers' ears by the strangled vocabulary of office jargon'.¹⁰ So begins Steven Poole's tour of office jargon. In this short book, this connoisseur of high theory harvests the 'low hanging fruit' growing in the orchard of managerial chicanery. This is not something Poole undertakes willingly. After all, his other books are about altogether more pleasant things like playing computer games, eating fine food, and complaining about many of the idiots who write about such things. It seems that Poole was only prompted to becoming the Voltaire of managerial no-speak after a short piece he wrote for The Guardian became an instant global hit, sparking a sharp outpouring of the linguistics loathings of thousands of jilted office workers.

Poole is not alone in turning his withering gaze on the world of managerial jargon. Regular pieces appear in the world's media decrying the triumph of management jargon, and how it has muddled clear language and clearer thinking. Frequent calls are sent out to stage a linguistic putsch against office drivel like 'going-forward', 'touching base', 'product evangelist', 'cradle-to-cradle', '360 degree thinking', 'paradigm shifts', 'bandwidth', 'calling out', 'cascading' and 'leveraging'. Perhaps the most perceptive chronicler of the empty language is Lucy Kellaway. In a regular column in Financial Times, Kellaway has charted the ongoing farce that is corporate clap-trap. She routinely subjects statements by CEOs to the kind of close reading which would have impressed the great Cambridge literary critic, F. R. Leavis. Each year she hands out the 'golden flannel award' for the worst instances of management speak. Some recent winners include Apple's CEO Tim Cook ('At the end of the day . . . this is a very key day for Apple'), Rob Stone, the CEO of a branding agency ('As brands build out a world footprint, they look for the no-holds-barred global POV that's always been part of our wheelhouse') and John Chambers of CISCO ('We'll wake up the world and lead the planet a little closer to the future'). For Kellaway, this hollow talk is much more sinister than an unfortunate mistake made by an over-stretched CEO. For her it muddies the language, heightens the insecurities of middle management, and ultimately undermines common sense.

While everyone seems to recognise the profoundly stupid qualities of most managerial neologisms, there seems to be little agreement about what precisely we might call this linguistic horror show. Some prefer the relatively neutral term 'jargon'. This suggests management has generated its own specialist vocabulary which helps specialists to make linguistic short cuts and talk with more precision. Jargon can become a linguistic barbed wire fence which stops unfortunate amateurs from trespassing on territory already claimed by experts. But perhaps the greatest benefits of professional jargon is that it nurtures a sense of what Mats Alvesson has called 'grandiosity'.¹¹ Committed users of management jargon are able to transubstantiate boring administrative activities into great deeds. Management jargon can help nurture a sense of self confidence in the chronically insecure world of middle management.

The term jargon helps us to capture the maddening complexity of much management speak. However, what it does not do is to allow us to see the sheer impermanence of many of these buzz-words. Management speak is made up of ideas which are designed to be consumed as quickly as possible and then forgotten about. To capture the sheer impermanence of these concepts, some researchers have used the concept of management fads and fashions.

Some time ago now, Eric Abrahamson pointed out that many managerial practices are not adopted because they work, but because they are fashionable.¹² Just like fashion in clothing, music or stand-up comedy, management fashions tend to come and go in waves. In their study of management fashions throughout the twentieth century, Stephen Barley and Gideon Kunda found there was a long cycle between management fashions which were either more rationalistic and control focused

10 Steven Poole, *Who Touched Base* in My thought shower (London: Seiptre, 2014)

11 Mats Alvesson, *The Triumph of Emptiness: Consumption, Higher Education, and Work Organization*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

12 Eric Abrahamson, 'Managerial fads and fashions: The diffusion and rejection of innovations.' *Academy of Management Review*, 16, 3 (1991): p. 586-612.

(scientific management, business process re-engineering etc) or more humanistic and relationship focused (human relations, corporate culture etc).¹³ They noticed that swings in management fashions were prompted by swings in the economy. During periods of economic expansion, managers favoured more rationalistic management fashion such as scientific management. When the economy was contracting, more humanistic forms of management become fashionable.

Although the state of the economy is vital, another important factor which explains why particular fads and fashions prove to be popular is the role of the management fashion industry. This industry is made up of a group of intermediaries such as consultants, gurus, the business press, business schools and think tanks whose business it is to create, distribute and stoke the consumption of new management fashions. The quicker there is a turn-over in these ideas, the better the management fashions merchants do. Just like taste-makers in other fields, management fashion merchants create a constant turn-over in ideas about appropriate management practices. But they also reap the benefits of continued transformation and change.

Constantly new forms of management speak are not just the result of the fashion cycle. Like teenagers, managers move between trends with little concern about whether the latest fashion actually fit them. Looked at this way, management jargon is like a second hand clothing store. It is a jumble of out of date ideas which are sadly still in use by the general public. While the continued turn-over in management fashions may seem like a little harmless fun, Abrahamson warns that 'swings in management fashions, far from being cosmetic and trivial, are in fact deadly serious matters'.¹⁴

Looking at management speak as a fashion reveals the swings and cycles as well as the gigantic corporation fashion industry lurking behind them. What it does not do is capture the sheer sense of rage which management speak induces in so many people. We might find new tastes in clothes, music or films a little silly. There might be the odd occasion where the more conservative among us feel their morals affronted. But this is something quite different to the way people experience management speak. For sure, it is a source of mild amusement at times. But all too often the latest management fad or fashion can cause feelings of profound disturbance and deep loathing. To accurately capture this anger, you need an equally angry word. Perhaps, we need to stop using such polite terms to speak about the impolite language of managerialism. Maybe bullshit is fit for the job.

The Bullshit Business

The business of bullshit is a trade in empty words. These are words you could find in 'town hall meetings' where CEO opine to their underlings. It might be in the dull exchanges during meetings, or in the slack chat around photocopiers. It could also be contained in lengthy emails, jaunty social media messages and, unread reports.

Some of this great river of talk and text endlessly flowing out of organizations is not bullshit. Some of this text simply describes what is: details of customer orders, meeting times, a new acquisition or a divestment, funding cuts, a minor success. These fragments of information may be boring, maddening or indifferent, but they are not bullshit. There are also occasional well reasoned words people use to talk about what has been (a good explanation for why that product didn't sell), or what could be (an interesting proposition about which market we should move into next). Sadly, well-reasoned words are rare in corporate life. And of course there is a third type of words which most of us are all too familiar with. These are words which have absolutely no reference in reality at all and lack the most basic characteristics of logic. Instead they seem to be a set of randomly connected

13 Stephen R. Barley and Gideon Kunda, 'Design and devotion: Surges of rational and normative ideologies of control in managerial discourse,' *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 37, 3, (1992): 363-399.

14 Eric Abrahamson, 'Technical and Aesthetic Fashions', in Barbara Czarniawska and Guje Sevón *Translating Organisational Change* (Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 1996), p.255.

vague terms which are impossible to relate to reality. These unreal and unreasonable words are bullshit. They do not try to hide or disguise the truth. Rather, as Harry Frankfurt points out, they are created with no relationship to the truth.¹⁵

Like anything in the word of business, bullshit is actively traded. While the bullshit artist might prefer the bar, the bullshit merchant can find a lucrative trade in any large organisation. They are likely to thrive because large organisations are often gigantic machines for manufacturing, distributing, consuming bullshit. There are clearly specialists at each stage of the chain – senior executives and their various consultants create it, middle management spend their days distributing it, and of course it is left to the rest of the organisation to eat it up. Significant effort is put into this whole process – days, months, years, whole lifetimes are spend in the commerce of bullshit.

It is easy to think it has always been this way. For sure, empty talk has been a constituent feature of modern organizations. However it has usually been held in check by some strict tests of reality and logic. In pre-modern organizations, feedback about the relationship between what one said and what one did was swift, conclusive and brutal. Because people were closely connected with the production process, they could see when words drifted from reality. There tended to be a calcified language in each workplace which was handed down as tradition. With the rise of modern production methods and large bureaucratic systems, this traditional language of work withered away. It was replaced by the jargon of experts such as engineers. Their talk was distant from the salty tongue of the shop-floor. But it often had a connection with the realities of work and some basic logic.

As factories producing goods have been progressively dismantled in the west and outsourced or replaced with automation, large parts of western economies have been left with little to do. Some sociologists worried this would lead to a world where people would be left with little work.¹⁶ We would only work a few hours a day and then need to find something to do with the rest of our time. The great tragedy for many is that just the opposite seems to have happened: at the very point where work seemed to be withering away, we all became obsessed with work as the path to the good life.¹⁷ To be a good citizen, you need to be a productive citizen. There is only one problem of course – there is little which needs to be produced. The great puzzle is this: how do we deal with all these work obsessed people when we have few real opportunities to work? The answer of course became a job-creation scheme. But as David Graeber points out, it was a job creation scheme with a twist.¹⁸ Instead of creating jobs which have some meaning and purpose, there has been the creation of a huge stock of what Graeber calls 'bullshit jobs'. These are jobs which people working in them experience as 'utterly meaningless, contrib(ing) nothing to the world' and they ultimately think 'should not exist'.

People working in bullshit jobs need to do something. And that something is usually the production, distribution and consumption of bullshit itself. These bullshit workers spend their days with varying degrees of enthusiasm working up, living with and often eating up the kind of managerial bullshit we have already covered in this chapter. Just think about the average office worker's day, and you begin to realise how mired in bullshit she is. She probably checks some mobile device a few minutes after waking up (the first of the 150 times people check their smartphones, on average, each day). Then she might sift through a few emails from insomniac colleagues. Then she hits the shower. Instantly her mind starts to wander to an upcoming strategy meeting and how best to frame an argument. On the way to work, she might read a report. Once at work, she is likely to sit through an endless stream of meetings, punctuated by frantic moments of checking emails, a lunch with colleagues, some downtime lurking on the internet. If it is Monday, then she is likely to being doing some internet shopping in the afternoon – one of the peak times for this activity. In the late

15 Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*

16 Andre Gorz, *Paths to Paradise: On the liberation from work* (London, Pluto, 1985)

17 Peter Fleming, *The Mythology of Work*, (London. Pluto, 2015)

18 David Graeber 'Bullshit Jobs', *Strike Magazine* (2013).

afternoon, she may have to attend a training session on a new management technique. If she is lucky, she might find an hour to work on a document. On the way home she might check her emails once again. Then maybe some dinner, watch television while lurking on social media, and to top it all off take one last look at her emails before bed. This is the kind of day which so many office dwellers live. It is a day where we feel we get little or no work done. In a sense, we are right. All we do is largely process, distribute, and consume bullshit. We feel that we have been really productive when we have miraculously managed to carve out a small slice of time to actually produce a little bullshit ourselves (for instance, completing a report, a PowerPoint deck or one of the many other meaningless products of contemporary work life).

Apart from a few clearly deluded individuals, everyone in the world of the office knows that the words they spend their days working with are ultimately meaningless. After-all increasing numbers of office dwellers are well educated people who have been taught many of the basics of critical thinking. Their years of education coupled with some degree of native intelligence means they do know many of the words which flow through their in-boxes are ultimately baseless. But they are also smart enough to know that the bullshit they work with can do some positive things. By offering ourselves up as conduits in the great corporate sewerage system we buy ourselves a job. This gives us an income, some social standing, a social network and a vague sense we are doing something with our life. If we point-blank refused to work with corporate bullshit, then we would probably quickly find ourselves to be emancipated from work, but also impoverished, socially maligned, deprived of friends (at least our current ones) and in need of some sense of purpose.

But we don't just give ourselves over to handling shit for selfish reasons. When it comes bullshit, we can be quite altruistic too. By making frequent use of bullshit, people can help to create at least a semblance of certainty in what are often highly uncertain organizational contexts. By using impressive sounding words, bullshitters can feel like they have some control. Bullshit gives us a way of putting all these big anxiety inducing questions aside. It allows us to focus on comfortable, yet ultimately empty solutions. Many people might not know quite what they are doing. Bullshit can provide them with some ersatz certainty they are doing is the right thing – even if this is not quite the case.

The liberal use of bullshit can help organizations appear to look good in the eyes of others. By adopting empty buzz-words, the bullshitter is able to ensure others think they are doing the right thing. For instance, if everyone else in your industry is talking about big data, and you are not (even if that is for good reasons), then it is likely that you will be seen as 'out of step'. When this happens, firms can be punished. In a study of the introduction of total quality management techniques, Barry Staw and Lisa Epstein found that firms which adopted the technique did not perform any better than firms which did not adopt the same techniques.¹⁹ They did however tend to be rewarded in others ways – they were more admired by others in the industry, they were seen as more innovative, and others thought they had higher quality management. All this image enhancement had one economic impact: their CEOs pay went up.

While the widespread circulation of bullshit certainly has some substantial upsides to it, it can also come with some fairly significant drawn-backs. Perhaps the most obvious is that as bullshit grows in organisations it can begin to increasingly take up more of the time and effort of people working within that organization. We are all required to not just process this growing flood of linguistic jargon, but also to spend time distributing it, consuming it, and (if we are lucky) producing it. The time devoted to tasks like attending information sessions, 'town halls', conference calls and meetings is significant. For many, these empty hours are a great source of aggravation. During these moments, speakers invariably lapse into one form of bullshit or another – leaving the audience with glazed eyes. It is not just people's time which is devoted to dealing with the bullshit – there is also a

19 Barry M. Staw and Lisa D. Epstein, 'What bandwagons bring: Effects of popular management techniques on corporate performance, reputation, and CEO pay'. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 45, 3 (2000): p.523-556.

significant amount of organizational resources invested in it as well. Expensive consultants are hired, plush meeting venues are booked, conference organisers are contracted and communications specialists are engaged.

As the sheer amount of time and resources devoted to producing, circulating and consuming bullshit increases, it leaves little room in an organization for much else. Members of an organization tend to compensate for this rather tragic situation in two ways. One tactic is to try to find time in other parts of their life when they are able to do the part of their job they think makes their work meaningful. This can often create a rather troubling situation where employees who find their whole work day taken up with meetings and then they spend their evenings and weekends on their 'real work'. The result can be a form of self-exploitation where employees take time off themselves just so they can do a good job. They do this not because they are forced to, but because they deeply care about the work they do.²⁰

A second response, which is at once slightly more healthy but also more deeply troubling, is the cynical one. Instead of desperately trying to find time in the rest of their lives, many people simply give up and accept that their job is completely meaningless. They accept there is no 'real work' in their role – it is all just bullshit. Such resignation has its advantages: It can help individuals cope; It frees up some time in the rest of their life where they might be able to find meaning; It means they will not always be trapped in an endless war with bullshit which they cannot win. But these significant psychological gains have profound collective implications. As people give up fighting to find time and space to do the work they think is important and meaningful, these very tasks stop getting done. As a result, the bullshit-work to real-work ratio begins to tip in favour of the bullshit. When this happens across the organization, it can mean much of the core work which actually helps the organization to fulfil its central purpose is neglected. In the best case scenario the real work is heaped onto the shoulders of increasingly overburdened junior staff who have not resigned themselves to a life mired in corporate bullshit quite yet.

As bullshit work takes over, and the core tasks of an organization begin to die off, the organization starts to be hollowed out. Instead of actually doing things (whether that is making products, teaching students, treating patients or whatever), the organization focuses more and more of its efforts on talking about doing things. The results is a whole lot of pseudo-work which seems to produce very little apart from the impression that there is work being done, somewhere. The organisation focuses on generating a spectacle it is doing something.²¹ Consider the average public sector agency which devotes increasing amounts of its time to showing that it has complied with regulation and less and less of its time to actually serving the public. Or a large multinational which focuses all its attention on trying to generate an appearance which would appeal to investors in the short term, and as a result neglects the underlying processes which made it a successful company in the first place.

This can have tragic consequences. The lack of anything actually getting done can mean customers and other stakeholders gradually realise the organization does not seem to be doing its core task at all, or if it is, it is being done poorly by under-resourced and under experienced people. As the organisations core tasks are neglected, people start to ask why it exists in the first place. They lose trust. At some point, no amount of empty talk is going to make up for the fact that the basic activities of the organization are not getting done to the required standard.

As consumers we don't go to a bank or a restaurant or a doctor for a large helping of business bullshit. We go there because we want a decent quality product or service at a commensurate price.

²⁰ Stuart J. Bunderson and Jeffery A. Thompson, 'The call of the wild: Zookeepers, callings, and the double-edged sword of deeply meaningful work', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 54, 1 (2009): p. 32-57.

²¹ Mikkel Flyverbom and Julianne Reinecke, 'The Spectacle and Organization Studies. *Organization Studies*, forthcoming.

As employees, we do not go to work in order to play around with the latest management buzzwords. We go there to use our skills and talents to contribute in some way to society and to be rewarded in return. As investors, we do not give our savings to companies to invest in endless strategy exercises. Rather, we would hope our money is invested in making organisation productive which will provide us with a reasonable rate of return. As citizens, we do not expect that organisations will come up with all the latest fads and fashions to impress us. What we are really interested is whether that organisation contributes to our society by creating jobs, paying tax, creating useful products or services. Sadly, the growth of business bullshit has stopped some of our best organisations from understanding why they exist in the first place.