

z/Bottom Line



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Term Limits

Elle is no ordinary dog. She's as adept with all the trappings of the Internet as she is with a new bone from PetSmart. Ever the teenager, it seems she can Instant Message (IM) with the best of them (AIM ID: ElleTechPooch). It's fascinating to watch the shorthand method of communicating she uses—BRB (Be Right Back), TTYL (Talk To You Later), and, of course, the ever popular, LOLWAB (Laughing Out Loud With A Bone). It's easy to see how these acronyms can make things easier with her doggie friends (even a few select cats!). And that is the point of acronyms—or is it?

Whether technical, scientific, academic or governmental, most industries develop a lexicon of their own. When overheard speaking their "language," people from these industries sound as though they're speaking "Greek" to the lay people around them. It may, in fact, make it easier to help associates of such industries communicate, and there are certainly other valid reasons to employ acronyms and lingo. But alas, in our beloved technology industry the intent of acronyms in many cases is to complicate, not simplify.

1,624. That's the number of acronyms found in the last issue of *z/Journal*. And that's not counting any of the advertisements. A simply staggering number to ask anyone to decipher; but decipher we do. We're good at it—well-trained with years of speaking in TLAs (Three Letter Acronyms) and techno-speak.

The issue though is the gap that's created when things are made more complicated than they need to be. In many cases, I see acronyms, abbreviations and newly created words founded simply to give the appearance of complexity. Why? Because of a misperception that has developed in our industry that in order for a solution to be valuable and worthy of its desired price point, it must be complex. It must have a blueprint, a roadmap, or heaven forbid, the "A Word"—Architecture.

For example, Service-Oriented Architecture (SOA) is all the rage right now. And well it should be because of what it actually can do. But the term implies a level of complexity that everyone needs to have explained. If we construct software that would easily and simply allow for the reuse and sharing of applications and data across multiple computers—wouldn't that be incredibly valuable? All computers speaking the same language, in essence. That is, in fact, one of the premises of SOA. But no one understands that by the name. With an abundance of words just to digest and decode, too many people never embrace what technology companies slave to deliver.

Imagine if someone proposed a Road Transport Architecture (RTA) to you, comprised of a design that

combines computer electronics, steel, aluminum, and rubber components working with measured explosions. The RTA is built on decades of design and refinement, with layers of fault-tolerant systems to ensure efficient operation. Would you want it? What would you do with it? Perhaps it would be better if we called it a car, and showed you that it can be used to move from place to place.

MIT professor and founder of the Simplicity Consortium at the MIT Media Lab, John Maeda, authored the book *The Laws of Simplicity*. His book begins with the quote: "Technology has made our lives more full, yet at the same time we've become uncomfortably 'full.'" Maeda's book is dedicated to bringing the concepts of simplicity to product design across the landscape, and he goes on to state that simplicity itself is "bound to be a growth industry." He also asks us to "imagine a world in which software companies simplified their programs every year by shipping with 10 percent fewer features at 10 percent higher cost due to the expense of simplification." It may sound counterintuitive, but as *The New York Times* columnist David Pogue said in his 2006 presentation to the annual TED Conference, "simplicity sells," and uses Apple's iPod as undeniable evidence.

Our industry as a whole must learn to posture technology differently. Customers don't want architecture. They want results. They want software to work, easily and simply. They want to use it, not have to be schooled in it. We need to change the way we talk about it, starting by speaking in plain language rather than abbreviated, contrived terms designed to imply creative complexity. Language has played a key role throughout history and it's no different in our industry. Some products fail regardless of their technical prowess because of the way the creators decided to communicate the benefits.

We need to make a stand. CxOs throughout the world are begging for less complexity. They want to run their businesses with what the technology community can provide, but we're making it too difficult for them to grasp what we're doing, simply by the terms we choose.

As Maeda concludes in his book, "Technology and life only become complex if you let it be so."

This is a critical issue that we all we must strive to change. IMHO.

And that's z/Bottom Line. **z**

About the Author

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