



101 Gordon Road, Toronto, ON, M2P 1E5
Tel 416 733 2320 Fax 416 733 4991
info@vectorresearch.com www.vectorresearch.com

Canada's Pulse

About those lost jobs:

How to talk about the economy now

Memo: **To economics reporters, economists**

RE: **How to talk about unemployment**

The way you talk about unemployment is wrong. The progressive website HarperIndex.ca of April 7, for example, quotes economist David MacDonald on the federal government's recent budget: "We've already lost 296,000 jobs since this crisis began.... So we already lost all the jobs that the stimulus package would create the day before it was even introduced."

Citing Statistics Canada data, CBC Radio economics correspondent Mike Hornbrook said in March that "83,000 jobs disappeared" in February. The previous month CBC reported that "Canada lost nearly one in seven manufacturing jobs between 2004 and 2008, or about 322,000 positions."

The phrase "lost jobs" reflects a framing bias. Jobs aren't like your gloves or umbrella – you don't lose them on the bus or forget them at the restaurant. They aren't misplaced in the way

your favourite T-shirt “must be around here somewhere.” Saying workers “lost” their jobs implies they’re personally to blame.

The *New York Times* recently cited a survey of Americans who were unemployed in the 1930’s depression that found they felt “guilty or ashamed that they had failed personally.” The frame “lost jobs” reinforces the idea that if you want paid work it’s up to you to go out and find it.

Manufacturers – to return to the CBC story – didn’t lose 322,000 jobs – they laid off 322,000 workers. If they don’t, union leaders, left-leaning academics and worker-friendly politicians should use the right language. They should urged CBC and Statistics Canada to watch their language, too.

The way your mind works is something like your phone. In humans, words trigger zones in the brain that motivate us to think and act in different ways. Certain words are like speed-dial – one triggers a spurt of mental images. Until now you probably didn’t think it sounds weird to hear someone who’s been laid off say, “I lost my job.” (Well, where was it the last time you had it?) But the image of a “lost” job sounds more ridiculous the more you think about it.

***The Kitchener-Waterloo Record*, profiling a local laid-off worker in February, reported, “Tom Moser has lost two jobs in the past seven months, but he's not ready to throw in the towel yet, despite soaring unemployment levels for this region and the country as a whole.”**

But Moser didn’t misplace his jobs. Somebody dismissed him. He was discharged, released, furloughed, fired, sacked. He could look all over for his lost jobs; they’re not missing. “Losing” them isn’t his fault.

There’s a similar euphemistic bias in the way economists and people in most mass media talk about prices. Canadian Press reported earlier this year, “With crude oil prices falling, motorists may wonder why gasoline prices are heading in the other direction. The average Canadian pump price rose to around 81.75 cents per litre Friday - more than three cents more.”

Prices do not magically ascend like helium-filled balloons. Someone determines prices. They are set, raised, determined, fixed and administered.

This is not hair-splitting or a rant over semantics. Words matter. To repeat like a song you can't get out of your mind that jobs are **lost** or prices **rise** brainwashes us to feel nothing can be done about them. When jobs are "lost" or prices "rise" no one's responsible or accountable.

Instead, saying companies raised prices 2% or employers ended half a million jobs or laid off, discharged or dismissed 500,000 workers depicts how the economy really works. This way frames your comments on the economy a better way.

It says, graphically, that executives setting prices made a decision. Employers had a choice. They decided to lay off employees. They might have chosen differently – to reduce hours instead of jobs, to accept lower margins, to dip into cash reserves to keep workers on the payroll or promote job-sharing.

For the type of person who reads StraightGoods, the benefit of using better economic words is gaining credibility with the public on economic policy and communicating more persuasively.

By Marc Zwelling

President

The Vector Poll™

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Marc Zwelling is founder of The Vector Poll™, a full-service opinion research firm that provides phone, mail and online opinion polls and focus groups and consulting services (www.vectorresearch.com).