

Your remote-worker community does not need a glossary first

The best community vocabulary is not designed from above; it is earned through repeated experience, improvised in use, and preserved before the conditions that created it disappear.

Your remote-worker community does not need a glossary first.

It needs repeated situations, shared memory, and enough room for members to name what keeps happening.

George Milburn's collection of hobo and tramp ballads offers a useful model for thinking about this. The songs were not merely entertainment. They helped traveling workers recognize one another, describe hardship, preserve technical knowledge, make jokes about scarcity, and criticize the institutions shaping life on the road.

The important point is that the vocabulary was not imposed from above.

It emerged from use.

A few principles stand out:

- Name recurring realities, not abstract values. Hobo slang was tied to movement, work, food, policing, survival, and temporary community. For a digital-nomad group, useful terms should similarly point to recognizable situations: a work location that looks ideal but fails under pressure, a temporary lodging arrangement that becomes untenable, or the moment when staying put is costing more than moving on.
- Let language stay adaptable. Convention songs used a stock framework but inserted the names of people present. A chalk-marked water tank could become a record of travelers from across the country. The structure stayed recognizable while the local details changed. Your community can provide prompts or patterns without demanding one official definition forever.
- Test words in performance. These traditions traveled through ballad singing, recitation, and repeated retelling. A term becomes real when people actually use it to make a story shorter, funnier, or more intelligible-not when it looks clever in a pinned channel.

- Keep variation visible. Hobo ballads were often improvised, fragmentary, and difficult to preserve. That is not a defect to eliminate immediately. Variants show how different members understand the same experience. Record them before standardizing them.
- Use humor, but do not erase the hardship. The repertoire could turn hunger, unemployment, death, bad institutions, and unreliable promises into parody. Humor made difficult conditions bearable and memorable, while still exposing the gap between fantasy and reality.
- Watch for outsider language. Milburn warns that commercial recordings and "homeguard" versions could sanitize or distort hobo material. A community term can suffer the same fate when it is polished into branding before members have made it their own.

A practical process follows:

1. Collect phrases members already repeat.
2. Attach each phrase to the situation that produced it.
3. Keep competing versions rather than choosing a winner too early.
4. Notice which terms help people recognize one another or act more intelligently.
5. Archive the stories behind the strongest terms.
6. Retire vocabulary when the material conditions-and the community's understanding-have changed.

The goal is not to manufacture an insider dialect. It is to preserve the compact intelligence that grows wherever people repeatedly travel, work, improvise, and look after one another.

The best term may begin as a joke. It becomes community language when someone else hears it and immediately knows the situation.