30 Business English phrases

We’ve compiled a list of the most common business terms that you will hear around the office. You have probably already noticed many of these words and idioms used in business meetings, emails and coffee-machine chat.

These phrases will be useful to anyone [**learning English**](https://preply.com/en/r/how-to-learn-english/) for work. Use them sparingly: everyone loves to hate the overuse of corporate-speak! For a less vocabulary-focussed guide to professional conversation, check out our article on [**how to master business English for managers.**](https://preply.com/en/blog/english-for-managers-secrets-for-learning-english/)

1. Cut corners

*The new filing system won’t work if we****cut corners.***

“To cut corners” is to complete a task in a fast and careless way. To do something without paying attention to details, thereby making mistakes or causing new problems.

2. Back to the drawing board

*The client hated your proposal so we’ll have to go****back to the drawing board****.*

*He’s going****back to the drawing board****on this one.*

To go “back to the drawing board” means to start again from the beginning with a completely new idea. The phrase makes you think of a blackboard being wiped clean. It is most often used when an idea or project is rejected.

It sounds quite friendly when you use it to say that you’re scrapping your own idea. Asking someone else to “go back to the drawing board” on a project is usually a bit strong!

3. Call it a day

*Right team, we’ve made plenty of progress, I think it’s time to****call it a day****!*

*The trial hasn’t worked, I’m afraid we’re going to have to****call it a day****.*

To “call it a day” means that you are giving up on something. This can refer to taking a break on a project because you have reached a good point to stop, or to stopping something completely. It can be negative or positive, depending on the context.

Taken literally, it is a phrase stating that the working day is officially over: that was a whole day, I declare that day finished!

4. Workflow

*I am having some****workflow****issues and won’t be able to help you until next week.*

*How is your****workflow****at the moment?*

This extremely ungrammatical business phrase has become very common in offices. “Workflow,” unsurprisingly, refers to the pace that an employee is set tasks and expected to complete them by.

When someone says that they have “workflow issues,” they often mean that they are overworked. It places the blame on the “flow” of incoming tasks — i.e., communication within the workplace — rather than the work itself, which is quite smart, and a good way of explaining a missed deadline! In rare cases, the term “workflow issues” also describes not having enough work. Most companies actually use [**project management software**](https://www.founderjar.com/project-management-software/) to manage their workflows and projects to not have workflow issues.

“How is your workflow?” is a way of asking a colleague whether they have too much work to do, or whether they feel underused. People can be reluctant to answer or ask a direct question about how busy they are at their job, so this is a polite way to talk about the problem.



5. Touch base

*If you could just****touch base****with Ritesh after the meeting, that would be great.*

To “touch base” with someone is to talk to them, whether digitally or in person, usually briefly. It usually described keeping someone up-to-date with developments on something you are both working on.

This is an expression that business jargon has adapted from the world of sport. In baseball, players touch base with their feet in order to be “safe” or to record an out.

6. Reach out

*Don’t hesitate to****reach out****to Helen if you have any questions.*

To “reach out” is to get in contact with someone, usually a person who you do not know well. It is very common, but when you first hear it, seems like a very strange use of the word “reach,” which implies physical stretching!

Need something to chat about when you are casually “reaching out” to someone? Check out our [**guide to the 10 most common small talk topics for work.**](https://preply.com/en/blog/2018/06/23/10-english-small-talk-topics-for-starting-a-conversation-at-work/)

7. Keep me in the loop

***Keep****Stuart****in the loop****when discussing the merger, please.*

***Keep me in the loop****on decisions about the targets for the next quarter.*

To “keep me/her/him/them in the loop” means to keep someone involved and updated about developments in a project. It comes from “looping” someone into an email chain — that is, cc’ing them into the digital conversation.  Check out our [**guide to writing emails in English**](https://preply.com/en/blog/2015/01/29/writing-emails-in-english-helpful-phrases/)for more on this.

You can “keep someone in the loop” by informing them of what happens in meetings, and alerting them when decisions are made.

8. Drill down into

*I think we can****drill down into****this further when we meet with the Product team.*

To “drill down into” something is to explore it in more depth.



9. As of yet

***As of yet****, we have no plans to hire a Social Media Manager.*

This is very commonly seen in emails, and means “at the moment,” This is another time when business jargon defies [**English grammar**](https://preply.com/en/r/how-to-learn-english/grammar/) rules, yet still comes across as formal!

10. Forward planning

*I think we need a degree of****forward planning****on this issue.*

Many business terms make basic concepts sound complicated in order to come across a little more impressive, and this is one of them. “Forward planning” just means “planning,” since all planning is for activities that will take place in the future.

Feeling inspired? Check out our article on [**63 phrases to take your business presentation to the next level**](https://preply.com/en/blog/50-essential-business-presentation-phrases-for-better-performance/#scroll-to-heading-0).

11. At the end of the day

***At the end of the day****, we did the best we could in a difficult situation.*

Despite the reference to the ending of the day, this phrase has nothing to do with time, or with going home after work. It means “when everything is taken into consideration,” and is used to signify that a speaker is giving their concluding statement on a matter. It can be exchanged for the word “ultimately,”

“At the end of the day” is often heard in business English, but is also quite informal.

12. Proactive

*I would really appreciate if you could be****proactive****on attracting new clients, George.*

This word is not solely used in corporate speak, but it is overused in an office setting. To be “proactive” is to take the initiative on something — which usually means embarking on a new task yourself, without waiting for your colleagues or boss to prompt you. It might also mean making the first step in contacting someone you are going to work with.

13. Action points

*I came out of the meeting with three****action points****. One – email Facilities about the printer…*

*As an****action point****, I will listen to some training podcasts*

“Action points” are, as you might guess, proposals for specific actions to be taken. This phrase is often heard towards the end of a meeting, or written at the end of a long email.

It is not grammatical, but it is useful since it flags up that you intend to translate ideas from a discussion into practical results.



14. To action/ Actionable

*I love your idea about painting the fence, but I don’t think it’s****actionable****at the moment.*

*That’s a good idea. I am going****to*** ***action****that this afternoon.*

Strictly speaking, the word “action” is a noun. However, in business English, it is often used as a verb. To “action” something just means to “do” it. The word “action” makes the mundane act of getting a task completed sound more dynamic and important!

Similarly, to describe something as “actionable” means that it is possible to get it done.

15. Cut to the chase

*Let’s****cut to the chase****: are you going to finish the report on time, or not?*

To “cut to the chase” means to “get to the point without wasting time.” It was first used in the movie industry to mean “skip to the car chase” — the most interesting and action-packed part!

It is quite an informal and lesser-used business idiom, but a useful term to be aware of.

16. Get the ball rolling

*Hopefully we can****get the ball rolling****on the new pitch next week.*

To “get the ball rolling” means to get started on something; to begin making meaningful progress.

17. Stay ahead of the curve

*We need to****stay ahead of the curve****otherwise our competitors will wipe us out.*

Something — for instance a product or company — that is “ahead of the curve” is more advanced than others of its kind. “The curve” refers to a line on an imaginary graph that shows the growth of a trend. For instance, Instagram was “ahead of the curve” in anticipating how much people would enjoy sharing pictures of their lunch.

To “stay ahead of the curve” is to maintain any advantage you have gained over the competition. It is also sometimes used more generally to describe the need to work hard to avoid losing progress.



18. Due diligence

*We’ve done our****due diligence****and none of the other contractors seem more qualified.*

Until very recently, “due diligence” was a term only used in a legal context. It used to describe the action that is considered reasonable for people to take in order to stay safe, and on the correct side of the law.

In business jargon, “due diligence” refers to the necessary research behind a good decision. If you have done your “due diligence,” then you have given an issue the attention it deserves and weighed alternatives to the solution you intend to take.

19. Best practice

*The CEO decided that clear desks are****best practice****.*

*I uploaded it following all the SEO****best practices****.*

A “best practice” is a method accepted to be the most effective means of doing something. They can be industry-wide or specific to a company. Many businesses encourage employees to follow a set of “best practices” described in a company handbook — that is, the rules, procedures and techniques to use in day-to-day operations.

20. Upskill

*We chose to****upskill****a junior employee rather than hire someone senior straight away.*

This business term is another formal but ungrammatical replacement for an existing word: to train. To some, “upskilling” sounds more youthful than “training”.



21. Dynamic

*We launched a****dynamic****new website in February.*

The word “dynamic” is not exclusive to corporate speak, but it is over-used in professional life. It is often heard as a more office-friendly way of saying “exciting”, “interesting” or “new”.

22. Streamline

*We need to****streamline****the archiving process, far too many files are getting lost.*

To “streamline” something is to simplify the process, thereby getting rid of unnecessary work. Beware if someone talks of “streamlining” your team: the word is sometimes used to hint that non-essential employees will soon lose their jobs.

23. Align

*I think we need to****align****with the customer service department on this issue.*

Businesses with high staff numbers often talk about “alignment” between teams. This means ensuring that different departments are working towards the same goals, and not accidentally working against each other, or doing similar tasks without sharing what they have learned.

If your boss says you “need to align” on something, that usually means a meeting is coming up soon.

24. Go the extra mile

*We always****go the extra mile****for our customers.*

To “go the extra mile” is to put more effort into a task in order to gain a result which is even better than necessary. If someone says you “went the extra mile” on a project, they are praising your work ethic!

25. Expedite

*Can you ask Basil to****expedite****the payment process for this, please?*

The word “expedite” is a little old-fashioned for standard conversation, but it is commonly heard in business English. It is a formal way of saying “speed up.”



26. Down the line

*They won’t make a difference now, but we will benefit from positive reviews****down the line****.*

“Down the line” is a friendly expression for “at some point in the future,” It generally refers to an action that will occur in a few months’ or years’ time, but this time frame is vague. Anything that is promised “down the line” will almost certainly happen. That said, it is a useful phrase for making promises you can’t necessarily keep or referring to results you are not confident in!

27 . Micromanage

*Olga is a good boss, she doesn’t****micromanage****her team.*

This is a negative word co-workers might use to discuss the behavior of controlling bosses. To “micromanage” someone means, literally, to manage them on a micro level. To watch the details of their work too closely, instead of giving them the chance to get on with it and take responsibility themselves. If your boss stands behind your desk and edits your emails, you might feel that they are “micromanaging” you.

28. Going forward

*We need to find out if increasing the budget will be sustainable****going forward.***

***Going forward****, I want you to work on your time management.*

The phrase “going forward” is extremely common in Business English, especially in emails. It is a more formal way to say “from now onwards,”

It refers to an action that will start now and continue in the immediate future indefinitely.



29. Let go

*We need to****let****Simon****go****, he has been very late almost every day this month.*

*Due to budget cuts, half of the Video Team has been****let go****.*

“Let go” is a gentle way of discussing employees being fired or made redundant. It is more commonly heard than “fired” since it is considered much more polite.

The word “let” sounds like it could refer to someone leaving their job willingly, but this is not the case: “let go” is never used to talk about someone who has left a company by choice. If there are rumors that employees might be “let go” at your workplace, here’s [**our handy guide on how to message recruiters on Linkedin**](https://preply.com/en/blog/2020/04/14/message-recruiter-linkedin/).

30. Close of play

*We’re going to need the report by****close of play****Wednesday.*

This is one of the many English idioms which was stolen from the world of sport. In cricket, “close of play” refers to the end of a day’s matches. In the office, it refers to the end of the working day.

As you might guess, it is  often heard in countries where cricket is played such as the UK and Australia, but rarely used in the US.