

21 of the most hated business phrases

Business jargon. For many it's a growing scourge on the corporate landscape. Here are the worst offenders.

We've all been there – at that meeting when someone is talking about thought showers, sustainable mobility solutions, and creating a road map for a precise flow chart in the right swim lane.

Such jargon-driven nonsense is a growing influence on modern business and startup culture, but it shouldn't be.

Avoid it at all costs and avoid people who use it

Have you ever touched base offline in a thought shower while boiling the ocean, punching a puppy, and sweeping the floors for some low-hanging fruit? Perhaps not. But if you have, you may be guilty of being a 'jargonist' a corporate 'guff monster' – a person who talks absolute 'tosh' in meetings.

You should avoid being a tosh-talker. It doesn't reflect well on you for many reasons.

If someone is talking tosh, those in the room who *know* what they are talking about will suddenly realise the tosh-talker is hiding something. The guff is just a bluff.

With this in mind, below are the most annoying phrases you should avoid.

If you have a particular [least] favourite slice of business jargon, let us know [here](#) so that we can update this

list. We thank you.

The 21 most hated bits of business jargon

Touch base offline

This one is the most hated bits of jargon of all time. It means let's meet and talk. So if someone says 'let's touch base offline', a wise person will never, ever meet or talk to that person again. Ever. Saying 'Let's touch base offline' is worse than saying 'Going forward'. Just to let you know.

Blue sky thinking

Anyone who uses this humdinger should be given a wide berth. It means creative ideas free from practical constraints. It is used by people with no creative ideas who are constrained by lack of imagination.

Punch a puppy

This awful phrase means to do something detestable but good for the business. We all know who should receive a blow if this is ever used.

Thought shower

This is the terrible way to say 'let's come up with several ideas'. You'll most likely need a shower on hearing it used at a meeting.

Thinking outside the box

The oldest and most jaded phrase. It means thinking creatively and innovatively. Again, anyone who uses this is neither creative or innovative. Full stop.

It's on my radar

It appears many people working in corporate offices are hauling around expensive object-detection systems that use radio waves to determine the range, angle, or velocity of objects.

Close of play

This means the end of the day. Why business jargon is so prone to sporting metaphors is anyone's guess. 'Hole in one' anybody?

Singing from the same hymn sheet

This is still widely used by managers who don't know how to get everyone in agreement. Perhaps they're trying to evoke some choral spirit or divine intervention?

Peel the onion

Love this one. One can just imagine a room full of junior execs, with a huge bunch of French onions, clawing away at the skins and weeping. It means to examine a problem in detail.

To wash its own face

This sounds like a 'child-rearing' metaphor. If a child can wash its face, it's able to do something useful? Perhaps. Maybe not. The phrase means to justify or pay for itself.

Become a change agent

You cannot be a modern, thrusting executive unless you are a "change agent", daringly leading whatever change it happens to be. Otherwise, you are an enemy of change.

We should pivot that idea

Pivot is a useful euphemism for failure. Pivoting is what you do when your business model proves to be less than 110%.

Get on all fours

To look at something in great details. To examine something closely. Are you on all fours with that? Should we get down on all fours and look at it from the client's point of view? If someone uses this phrase, crawl out of the room.

Sweep the sheds

An old school farming metaphor it appears. Why not? What it means is to have a humble attention to detail.

Boil the ocean

This one is currently doing the rounds in corporate land. It paints quite an exciting picture. It conjures up volcanoes, catastrophe, and billions of dead fish. Less dramatically, it means 'to waste time'.

Make hay while the sun shines

This cracker is so old; Methuselah used it. It simply means things are going well, so keep doing what you are doing.

It is what it is

Let's move on; we can't be a change agent here. Just accept it. Don't bother sweeping the sheds here and we certainly won't pivot that idea.

Giving 110%

Giving more than 100%, which is impossible, but implies a lot of effort. Football managers use this phrase a lot.

Take it to the next level

No, this is not something you roar at the DJ over the din of some banging Deep House tunes. It means to attempt to make something better or advance a project.

Low hanging fruit

I don't Adam and Eve it. This juicy piece of jargon is so trite it's now lifeless. However, it's still used by a lot of people in suits. It just means easy pickings, something that doesn't require much effort.

Going on a journey

'We need to bring people on the journey with us.' For some reason, everyone in corporate land is now packing up the mules and going on treks across desert dunes. If someone starts blithering on about 'the journey', it's probably best that you get up and walk out of the room. Take your own journey. Make sure you are going forward.

What kind of people use such guff?

And so to the obvious question. What does it say about people who use these phrases? Why do people speak such tosh?

Steven Poole, who has written a book on 'unbearable office jargon' told Radio 4's *Today* programme that office jargon can sometimes have sinister undertones. "It's all about obscuring the violence of what the bosses are actually doing to people so they can carry on with a clear conscience."

Chrissie Mahler, the founder of the Plain English Campaign in the UK, has called business guff “downright dangerous” and slammed it for “acting as a barrier to procuring new business”.

The message is clear. Don’t use it. But why does it continue to spread? Perhaps the simplest explanation is that jargon is infectious. If someone likes the sound of a phrase – for example, ‘boiling the ocean’ – they use it at meetings, and it’s a guarantee that someone, either junior or senior, will also like the phrase. That person will store it away for future use. And by the time the sheds are swept, and the low hanging fruit is in the basket, it will spread around the office like a thought shower on a journey.

Steven Poole is the author of [Who Touched Base In My Thought Shower? A Treasury of Unbearable Office Jargon](#) (Sceptre).

Lucy Kellaway, writing in the *Financial Times* and *The Irish Times*. [How to become fluent in business guff and create terrifying tosh to use in emails and meetings.](#)

Kellaway republishes some of the finest exhibits of guff she has seen and reveals the top eight rules when creating tosh, “along with some splendid examples of how to follow those who use guff”.

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