

In the workplace, native English speakers use a wide variety of idioms to describe people. Some of these expressions are positive, some negative, and others neutral. Knowing these idioms means more than learning the language – it is part of understanding business culture. In order to participate fully in a business context, you should become familiar with these commonly used phrases.

Use the expression yourself only after you have mastered the meaning. To be safe, start using the complimentary idioms, to make positive comments about people at work. Then, move on to using the neutral expressions. Last, when you are 100% sure of the meaning, add the negative expressions to your speaking vocabulary. Remember, if you say something nice about someone by mistake, it's not so bad. However, if you say something strongly negative, it could be tricky in terms of your career. So always make sure you understand the meaning fully before using any idioms to describe your colleagues. Also, be aware that the meaning of some idioms may overlap. For example, a generally positive or neutral idiom may be used in a negative way, depending on the position, point of view, or tone of the speaker.

POSITIVE IDIOMS	
angel investor	a rich person who invests money or provides financial backing to help an entrepreneur or start-up business
blue-eyed boy	a favorite male who is liked very much and treated very well by people in authority
cash cow	a product or service that brings in a regular source of income
eager beaver	a very hard-working, enthusiastic employee
eagle eyes	a person who has eagle eyes (<i>not</i> "is eagle eyes") can see or notice details very well
gift of the gab	someone who has the gift of the gab (<i>not</i> "is the gift of the gab") can speak easily, confidently, and well
go-getter	someone with a lot of energy, drive, and motivation
jack of all trades	a person who can do many different things
made of money	a rich, wealthy person with a lot of money and/or assets
man of his word woman of her word	a reliable, trustworthy person who does what he/she promises to do
mover and shaker	a person who has a lot of influence in a company and gets a lot of good things done
smart cookie	an intelligent person who is able to handle difficult situations
top dog	a person who has a lot of power, influence, and success, especially after a tough competition
whiz kid	a brilliant, very intelligent, highly talented young person

NEUTRAL IDIOMS	
big fish in a small pond	a person who has a high-level, important position in a small group, company, or organization
bigwig	an important, influential person in a group, company, or organization
blue-collar worker	an employee who works with his hands or does manual labor; traditionally, such employees used to wear blue uniforms and worked in trade occupations; examples include construction workers, plumbers, electricians, and mechanics
company man	a person who supports company policies, even over the interests of fellow employees

dark horse	a secretive person who has qualities and talents people do not know about; also someone who competes in a competition or election and is not expected to win
head honcho	the top person in an organization; someone with a lot of authority or influence
major player	a large, important and/or influential person, group, or company in a particular field or market
number cruncher	a person who works with numbers, statistics, or financial information, and is comfortable and skilled at doing so
people person	a warm, friendly person who is good at working with others and communicates well with them
poker face	a person who has a poker face (<i>not</i> “is a poker face”) does not show or reveal any emotion
quiet as a mouse	describes someone who doesn’t make any noise; a very quiet person
salt of the earth	describes a good person who is simple, reliable, and trustworthy; can also be negative because it implies the person is not sophisticated
silent partner	a person who invests money in a business but does not participate in the daily operation of the business
voice in the wilderness	a person who warns people about something that others do not take seriously
whistleblower	a person who exposes improper, illegal, immoral, or corrupt practices in a group, company, or organization by informing the authorities, police, public, or media
white-collar worker	an employee who works at an office job; traditionally, such employees wore white shirts; examples include accountants, executives, and bankers

NEGATIVE IDIOMS

armchair critic	a theoretical person who criticizes the way others handle problems or issues, without trying to do anything to solve the problem himself/herself
ambulance chaser	a lawyer who specializes in personal injury claims against large companies
bean counter	an accountant
cog in a machine	a person who is or feels like he/she has a small, unimportant job in a large organization or company
dead duck	a person, thing, or project that is sure to fail because of a big mistake; someone or something for which there is no hope
dead wood dead weight	people in a group, company, or organization that are not useful, needed, or productive anymore, and need to be dismissed
fast talker	a confident person who can persuade others to do something dishonest because of his/her ability to speak well; someone who can get others to believe something that is not true
fuddy-duddy	an old-fashioned person who has not learned modern behavior or thinking
know-it-all	an irritating person who acts as if he/she knows everything; someone who acts as if he/she is very smart and clever, but in a boastful way; same as smart alec and wise guy
lame duck	a person, group, or organization that is weak or unsuccessful; also an elected leader who does not have much time left in office
loan shark	a dangerous person who lends money to desperate people at very high interest rates and may threaten violence if the money is not repaid
pain in the neck pain in the ass	a difficult, unpleasant, or annoying person
pen pusher pencil pusher	an employee or clerk with a “boring” job, who handles a lot of paperwork

rotten apple	a dishonest, corrupt person who has a negative influence on his/her colleagues; someone who usually causes problems for the management, organization, or company
sitting duck	a person who is an easy victim, open to attack, influence, or deception because of his/her weaknesses
stool pigeon	a police informer
smart alec	an employee or clerk with a "boring" job, who handles a lot of paperwork
smart aleck	an irritating person who acts as if he/she knows everything; someone who acts as if he/she is very smart and clever, but in a boastful way; same as wise guy and know-it-all
stick-in-the-mud	someone who prevents other people from having fun; same as a wet blanket
stickler for the rules	a person who insists on following rules and regulations exactly
wet blanket	someone who prevents other people from having fun; same as a stick-in-the-mud
wise guy	an irritating person who acts as if he/she knows everything; someone who acts as if he/she is very smart and clever, but in a boastful way; same as smart alec, and know-it-all
wolf in sheep's clothing	a dangerous person who seems to be harmless
yes man	someone who always agrees with his/her superiors, mainly in order to gain their approval, even if he/she does not accept their ideas or practices

QUIZ

Classify the following idioms as positive, negative or neutral. Then, say or write the meaning of the idiom. Compare your answer with the explanations above.

1. The new IT guy's a real whiz kid.
2. She's a natural salesperson; she has the gift of the gab.
3. I'm really afraid because my friend borrowed the money from a loan shark.
4. My neighbor Martin is the salt of the earth. I can count on him for anything at all.
5. When did you turn into such a yes man. I thought you could think for yourself!
6. Unfortunately, we have a lot of dead wood in that division. I'll speak to the CEO about it when I get back to the head office.
7. I can't stand that guy. He's such a know-it-all.
8. They're a major player in the Asian market.
9. Your laptop stopped working? Why don't you talk to Paul? He's a jack-of-all-trades.
10. Oh, don't be such a stickler for the rules. With that terrible snowstorm on the way, you should let the workers go home early today.