

World Wide Words

Michael Quinion writes about international English from a British viewpoint

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Contents

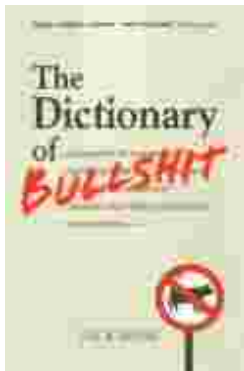
1. Feedback, notes and comments
2. Turns of Phrase: Onshore offshoring
3. Weird Words: Lorinery
4. Noted this week
5. Reviews: Three views of business and office jargon
6. Questions & Answers: From pillar to post
7. Sic!

5. Reviews: Three views of business and office jargon

Ducks in a Row: The A-Z of Offlish Do not be misled by the cynical humour of this little book: there's more truth here than in a shelf of management guides. *Offlish*, of course, is *Office English*, a language with a passing resemblance to the one we know and love. In Offlish, one's thinking may be *joined-up*, *lateral*, *blue skies*, *ideas-driven*, *inspirational*, and *off the wall*, or it may even be *outside the box*; one may even conceivably *think the unthinkable*. One may be a *big hitter*, a *mover and shaker*, a *big cheese*, *punch above one's weight*, exhibit *bouncebackability*, or perhaps be *quality-driven* and *proactive*, a person who *makes it happen*. One may be an *always-on* or *full-on* worker with a *can-do attitude*. But do avoid being thought a *bean-counter* or *micromanager*. To reduce costs managers may *downsize*, *retrench*, *reorganise*, *re-engineer*, *de-layer*, *rightsized*, *smartsized*, *streamline*, *consolidate*, *let go*, *cut out the dead wood*, or *trim the fat*, but less often sack anyone. If you send a copy as a present to your boss, it is advisable to do so anonymously. It was nice to note that he mentions my Web site, less good that he quotes its address incorrectly.



[Carl Newbrook, *Ducks in a Row: The A-Z of Offlish*; Short Books; hardback, pp246; ISBN 1904977359; list price £9.99.]



The Dictionary of Bullshit Nick Webb would say that few of the words in his more serious but if possible even more cynical compilation could be called jargon. "Bullshit," he writes, "is much broader than jargon; its defining characteristic is well-camouflaged mendacity of a particularly insidious kind." His first chapter covers much the same ground as Carl Newbrook's, though his entries are more discursive and include such oxymoronic aspirational concepts as the *paperless office*. The later chapters feature the bullshit of politicians, sales managers, the professions, and new agers. He also introduces us to such magic concepts as *porkometrics*, the obfuscation of truth by numbers. The final chapter contains

entries on “fossil words and knackered old images”, in one of which he is kind enough to describe me as an “all-round word maestro”. I’d return the compliment, except that five pages later he gets the origin of *cash on the nail* wrong.

[Nick Webb, *The Dictionary of Bullshit*, Robson Books; hardback, pp174; ISBN 1861058888; list price £9.99.]

Green Weenies and Due Diligence This is an American view of the same field, though the close links between the financial and commercial worlds of Britain and the US mean that many terms are common to all three books. It’s larger and more serious than the others, and benefits from Gahan Wilson’s witty cartoons. Ron Sturgeon has included much shorthand jargon of business people, accountants, and lawyers. *Due diligence*, for example, is a standard term for the care required of professionals to make sure that the assets and liabilities listed in the contract are accurate. But many of his terms are funny, because business people really do use a weird language all their own. The author’s classic case, the one that he says got him started on collecting terms, makes up the other half of his title: *green weenie*, an unpleasant surprise discovered belatedly as part of a transaction or deal (often as a result of too little due diligence). Here you will also find—to list some of the 1200 entries at random—*starter marriage* (“a college graduate’s first real job”); *kissing your sister* (“some action that has no excitement or result”); *banana problem* (“a project so simple that a big, dumb gorilla would handle it”); and *pencil whip* (“to criticize someone in a written report instead of verbally”). On a down note, the index has clearly been generated automatically, which has led to some oddities of reference. And Mr Sturgeon distinguishes himself in this company by not mentioning *World Wide Words* ...



[Ron Sturgeon, *Green Weenies and Due Diligence: Insider Business Jargon—Raw, Serious and Sometimes Funny*; Mike French and Company Inc; hardback, pp305; ISBN 0971703116; list price US\$28.95.]

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