20 Intermediate Business English terms you should know if you work for a startup

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How is your Business English?

Would you consider yourself an intermediate Business English speaker? If the answer is yes, then at this stage you're probably familiar with the basic vocabulary used in day-to-day business interactions. You might even have taken a few English classes. And you might have relied on a few of the classic Business English textbooks.

When I used to teach English in a corporate environment, the Market Leader series was our textbook of choice. This is an excellent book, and if you're using it to improve your English skills, you've made an excellent choice. A lot of my intermediate Business English students love it.

But the problem with textbooks, in general, is that they take a long time to update. So when new terms start being used more often in a business context, the textbooks have to wait for revisions and republication to incorporate these words into lessons.

And even when books do get updated, classroom adoption is relatively slow. It takes a significant amount of time for language schools to substitute older materials for new ones.

As an intermediate Business English student, you might be missing out on new vocabulary, particularly new terms related to startups and online business.

In this post, we'll teach you 20 intermediate Business English terms you should know if you're working for a startup.

Dear students, this is our disclaimer: This content is meant for teaching purposes only and it does not constitute business advice or financial advice of any kind.

1. A hub (noun)

A hub is the central point of activity or a point of connection. In Business English for startups, we use the word hub to refer to the place where a lot of startups are concentrated.

Example: Silicon Valley has been a startup hub since the 1970s.

Example: Valencia is a relative newcomer to the startup scene, but the city is already gaining fame as an up-and-coming Spanish startup hub.

To learn more about how a city becomes a startup hub, have a look at episode 11.

2. To scale up (verb)

Also: scalability (noun) and scalable (adjective)

If you scale your business, or you scale up your business, that means you're growing your business and potentially your market share.

Example: The CEO doesn't think she can scale up the business without a significant contribution from investors.

Example: When we founded the startup, we wanted to make sure that it would be scalable. It is essential to be able to grow and adapt if you want to stay in business.

3. To bootstrap (verb)

Also: bootstrapping (noun), bootstrapped (adjective)

When you're bootstrapping a business, you're not taking money from any outside investors. You may be using your personal savings or using your own home as an office. Maybe you're even bringing in a bit of revenue with your product. But your focus is on keeping your expenses low and achieving positive cash flow.

There are some advantages to bootstrapping, such as being able to maintain complete control of your startup.

Example: A lot of today's successful tech companies – such as Basecamp, Mailchimp and Skyscanner – started as bootstrapped businesses. They achieved positive cash flow without taking any money from investors.

Example: When I was bootstrapping my startup, I decided not to draw a salary for the first six months. It was a hard sacrifice to make, but it was worth it in the end.

4. A perk (noun)

A perk is another benefit that you get from your job, in addition to your salary. It could be a company car, a gym membership, tuition reimbursement, or being able to set your own hours.

Example: We can't offer high salaries because we're still a small startup. But we can offer perks such as remote working and a company car.

5. Disruptive (adjective)

Also: to disrupt (verb), disruption (noun)

In startup vocabulary, disruption refers to the process through which a small company with limited resources challenges the status quo and the established businesses in a certain field.

According to Clay Christensen, the Harvard professor who coined the term disruptive innovation, there are two types of disruptive products.

The first type is a product that can serve a market that wasn't served before, also known as a new-market disruption. This refers to discovering a new type of customer.

The second type of disruptive product offers a cheaper or easier alternative to an existing product. This is called a low-end disruption.

Example: Airbnb disrupted the hotel industry by building a business model that allows tourists to rent a room from locals.

We talked [about disruptive innovation] in episode 9.

6. A pain point (noun)

A pain point is a recurring and specific problem that a potential customer has and that your product should aim to solve. In other words, you can think of pain points as problems that need a solution. As a business, your goal is to address your potential customer's pain points.

Example: Financial technology apps aim to address the pain points that clients experience with traditional banks. These pain points include issues such as limited online banking options, slow onboarding and poor customer service.

7. To gain traction (phrase)

If a product is gaining traction, that means it's becoming more popular. We can also use this expression to refer to ideas or trends. If an idea is gaining traction, it's becoming more widely accepted.

Example: First, you have to put in the work to get more clients and increase your revenue. Once your startup gains traction, then you'll be able to attract more investors.

8. Seed capital/seed money/seed funding/Series A

In Business English for startups, seed capital refers to a very early investment meant to support the running of the business until it can generate cash.

Think of it as a seed that the investor plants with the expectation that it will grow into something bigger that the investor can profit from.

Let's say you got your seed money, but after a year or two, you realize your startup needs even more money to scale. That's when you can start thinking about a Series A round. This is the name of the first serious round of financing. Series A funding can range between one million and 10 million dollars.

If Series A is successful, but you still need to scale up – to grow your business and your market share – you may raise a Series B or even a Series C round.

Example: We tried to raise our seed funding from investors, but we weren't successful. In the end, we decided to ask our friends and family for money.

To learn more ways to raise money for your startup, have a look at this lesson.

9. To vet a startup (phrase)

If you vet something or someone, that means you carefully check the information you have about them to make sure that it is accurate, complete and suitable.

An investor can vet a business before investing money in it. Similarly, a company can vet potential employees to make sure they don't have a criminal record.

Example: Before investors give you money, they'll want to vet your startup. This means they'll check details such as your business plan, your product, your team, and the financial situation of your startup. The vetting process is very important in the early stages of raising capital.

10. To raise capital (phrase)

To raise capital (or to raise money) means to be successful at getting money for your business. You can raise capital from investors, crowdfunding campaigns, fundraising campaigns or donations.

Typically, startups don't raise all the capital they need at once. They usually raise the money they need during several funding rounds.

Example: I will only start a business if I can raise enough money from investors. I don't want to use up my savings.

11. Burn rate (noun)

This term comes from the aerospace industry, where it is used to refer to the burning of fuel. But of course, when it comes to Business English for startups, burn rate describes the speed at which a new startup spends – or burns through – the money that is available, when it is not making more money than it's spending.

A burn rate is usually measured in monthly increments. For example, if a startup has a burn rate of $10,000, that means the company is spending $10,000 a month without generating much revenue.

Example: If we don't slow down our burn rate, we will run out of money by the end of next year.

12. Cash runway (noun)

Cash runway describes how long a startup's current cash resources will last at their current burn rate (see point 11). In short, it refers to how long a new business can operate at a loss before it runs out of money.

Example: They decided to raise more money for their startup when they noticed that their cash runway was only five months**.**

13: Venture capital firm and angel investor

You can get the seed money (see point 8) from an angel investor or from a venture capital firm (also known as a VC). What's the difference between an angel investor and a VC firm?

Generally, an angel investor is a very wealthy person using their own money to invest.

On the other hand, VCs have a whole company behind them. That means they have other investors, board members, advisors, and even pension funds.

14. Pitching (noun)

Also: to pitch (verb)

Pitching refers to talking about your company or your idea with the goal of convincing others to do something for you. In the case of startups, you could be pitching to investors, to clients or to other business partners.

Example: When it comes to pitching, the cultural differences between American startups and German founders are obvious. Americans focus more on the storytelling aspect of pitching, but Germans pay more attention to the technical information about their companies.

15. Pitch deck (noun)

A pitch deck is a short slide presentation that you deliver to investors in order to share information about your startup, your business model and your market.

A good pitch deck will keep the information concise and relevant. Have a look at this collection of pitch decks from some of the largest startups in the United States and Europe.

16. To break into a market (phrasal verb)

If your company breaks into a market, it's entering a market; it's starting to do business in that market.

Example: The German appetite for international expansion is due to the fact that venture capital (meaning money and access to investors) is still very concentrated in the United States. So German startups that want to access some of that money, have to break into the U.S. market. To break into a market means to enter a market, to start doing business in that market.

17. Time to hire (phrase)

In Business English for human resources, "time to hire" measures the amount of time that passes from when a candidate applies for an open position (a vacancy) until the moment they accept the job offer.

Example: If your time to hire is longer than one month, about 57 percent of candidates lose interest in the job opening.

We talked about the role of Human Resources in a startup in this episode.

18. Candidate engagement (phrase)

Candidate engagement measures how well candidates feel they were treated during the recruitment process. It's not surprising that a lot of candidates, about 60 percent actually, think that they haven't been treated fairly during their job search.

Poor candidate engagement may lead to losing high-quality leads (specialists who are in high demand as employees).

For startups, candidate engagement is really important because startups can't afford to position themselves as a bad company to work for. Since recruitment uses up valuable resources in a startup, candidate engagement can make or break your recruitment process.

This survey found that when job seekers have a bad experience, about 42 percent of them would never apply to that company again and 22 percent said they would tell others not to apply either. Candidates even report that they stop buying a company's products if they feel that the company treated them poorly.

19. Click-and-mortar business (phrase)

Businesses used to be split between brick-and-mortar retailers (businesses with a physical presence, such as a store or a restaurant) and online retailers.

Click-and-mortar refers to a business model that incorporates both online and offline operations. A good example of a click-and-mortar startup is Warby Parker, an online retailer of prescription glasses. Warby Parker began operating exclusively online in 2010, but they decided to start opening stores in 2013.

Example: Warby Parker transitioned from an eCommerce model to a click-and-mortar model when they opened their first store in New York in 2013.

20. Social entrepreneurs and social impact

Social impact refers to the effect that an organization's actions have on the well being of a certain community. Social entrepreneurs aim for social impact. That means their goal is to have an effect on the well-being of a certain community and leverage the power of entrepreneurship to create positive social change. To leverage means to use something to your advantage.

Example: A new generation of social entrepreneurs is transforming the fashion industry by focusing on sustainable practices and a fair trade approach to sourcing fabrics.

You can read more about social impact from The Center for Social Impact Strategy.

For an in-depth look at how social enterprises operate, check out episode 15.

We hope these 20 intermediate Business English terms for startup professionals will give you a good idea of where to start improving your vocabulary. As always, we encourage you to look up words and phrases as you come across them.

For an intermediate Business English learner, it may be hard to know what to study next.

This is where we can help by offering you personalized one-to-one lessons with a Business English trainer.

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