

By definition, idioms are expressions unique to a particular language that we shouldn't interpret literally. Here, we explain the meaning and background of a few idioms commonly used in business. While idioms can be useful figures of speech, be sure to use them sparingly!

## 1) *Value-added*

Definition: Traditionally, the term "value-added" refers to value that is added to a product or material at each stage of manufacturing or distribution. However, businesses now frequently apply this term to intangible products and services.

Usage: "Several researchers have studied the value-added role of venture capitalists."

Note: In business, "value-add" is also used in relation to people, which has been the subject of discussion on National Public Radio. In an interview on August 26, 2008, Mark Warner, then a candidate for the U.S. Senate, asserted, "I think my value-add would be to put together what I'm calling the 'radical centrists.'" The following day, commentator Robert Siegel tried to explain the meaning of value-add, a term he found oft-used in "biz-speak, a language a little related to English."

## 2) *At the end of the day*

Definition: Ultimately; in the end.

Usage: "At the end of the day, employees are our greatest asset."

Note: This phrase was cited by a Dow Jones Factiva executive as the cliché most often used in newspaper articles in 2006. According to Chris Pash, Director of Content for the Asia-Pacific region, the Washington Post and the New York Times both used the phrase 135 times in the first half of 2006.

## 3) *Down to the wire*

Definition: The last minute; just before the deadline.

Usage: "The team worked down to the wire to finish the project on time."

Note: In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, wire was placed across horse racetracks above the finish line. The wire helped to determine which horse's nose crossed the line first. A very close race would have been "down to the wire," or one whose outcome was unclear until the very last second.

## 4) *Glass ceiling*

Definition: An unacknowledged barrier to advancement, especially for women and people of color.

Usage: "In many professions, it is difficult for women to break through the glass ceiling to the upper level of management."

Note: Katherine Lawrence and Marianne Schreiber of Hewlett-Packard coined the term in 1979 to describe their difficulties in career advancement at HP. The phrase later appeared in a 1986 Wall Street Journal article, and has been in common use ever since.

Sources: The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy, Third Edition. 2002.  
The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition. 2000.  
[http://www.eslmania.com/students/idioms/Business\\_idioms.htm](http://www.eslmania.com/students/idioms/Business_idioms.htm)

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