

WEEKLY ENGLISH PRACTICE

How Men Slowed Down Rolling Luggage

11/11/21 / **Keyword: luggage**

Why do some inventions and innovations take so long to happen? Maybe gender stereotypes are partly to blame. ECP coach Rob uses putting wheels on luggage as an example.



The other day, I turned my bookcase round 90 degrees and suddenly, with that simple and seemingly obvious action, doubled the space available for my slowly increasing permanent collection of books (I try to lend out, recycle or sell most books I read and I only keep hold of a few on a permanent basis). I could now place books *on both sides* of the book case. Why hadn't I thought of that before?

Innovation is a curious thing. The “**blindingly obvious**” can, in fact, **stare** us in the face for an eternity before **jump-starting** a revolution in a particular area. Take the wheelie suitcase, for example. Nobody would imagine *carrying* their suitcase nowadays, right? So why did it take so long for someone to think of putting wheels on one? We drove a wheeled vehicle on the moon before we could buy a wheeled suitcase in shops, for goodness sake!

The standard story tells us that in 1970, an American luggage executive called Bernard Sadow unscrewed four **castors** from a wardrobe and fixed them to a suitcase. Then he put a strap on his contraption and patented it two years later. However, rolling luggage didn't become an instant success.

Years later, Sadow explained to the New York Times that men in particular resisted the concept – “it was a very macho thing”. No man would ever roll a suitcase because it was simply “unmanly”. Put it on your shoulder!

But crucially, a second gender stereotype was at work that meant Sadow could hardly get any US **department stores** to sell his wheelie suitcase -

the mobility of women. There was nothing preventing a woman from rolling a suitcase because she had no masculinity to prove. But the assumption was that women didn't travel alone. If a woman travelled, she travelled with a man who would carry her bag for her. The industry couldn't see any commercial potential in putting wheels on bags.

But in 1987, Robert Plath, a Northwest Airlines pilot and DIY hobbyist, devised the modern cabin bag - smaller, more stable and with just two wheels. He sold his early models to **fellow** pilots and flight attendants, and it was the sight of cabin staff walking effortlessly through airports that established them as something professionals used. Finally, men no longer felt emasculated by wheels on suitcases.

In fact, women had been combining wheels and suitcases for decades before Sadow's 'invention', but the genius of the idea flew under the radar because it flew in the face of prevailing gender stereotypes. Katrine Marçal in her book *Mother of Invention: How Good Ideas Get Ignored in an Economy Built for Men*, explains that this has been a common occurrence throughout history. The electric car is a good example, always perceived as slower and safer and therefore 'feminine', even back in the 1800s when the motor industry was in its infancy. The electric starter motor for the petrol-driven car - that substituted the manual, and physically demanding, **crank** - was a **gimmick** 'for the ladies'. And why on earth would a man need a roof on his car if he didn't have a fancy hairstyle to protect? *Turn to page 2*

Useful vocabulary

blindingly obvious: very obvious

to stare: to look fixedly at something with wide open eyes

to jump-start: give added impetus

castors: small swivelling wheels that help you move something

department store: a large shop with many different departments

fellow: a person in the same position or activity

crank: a rod bent at a right angle that is turned in a circular motion

gimmick: something designed to attract attention

intractable: difficult or stubborn

to bolster: to support or strengthen

to stunt: to prevent from growing or developing

Let's chat about that!

1. According to the article, why did it take so long to invent the wheelie suitcase?
2. Do you agree that “masculine mindsets have stunted progress and innovation”? Why/not?
3. When was the last time you carried a suitcase or heavy bag?
4. Describe some 'macho' attitudes that have changed during your lifetime. And some that haven't.
5. What is your favourite invention of the last 30-odd years? And one you dislike?

LIVE! English Events

Come and socialise in English!

ECP's Cinema Nights

Friday 26th November at 18:30

Send a WhatsApp to John on 657731354

Coffee Saturdays

2021-22

11:00-12:30

Panadería Bertiz C/Francia 10

2nd October	5th March
6th November	2nd April
4th December	7th May
5th February	4th June



5. At the crack of dawn

This means that you're doing something just as the sun is rising or at the earliest possible time.

For example: "The plane leaves at 7.30 am, so we have to get up at the crack of dawn to get to the airport on time."

6. Off the beaten track

This is somewhere that it is far away from where many people live or visit.

For example: "I stayed all summer on an island that was off the beaten track. It was so quiet and peaceful."

Marçal goes further: "Doctrines like 'real men don't eat vegetables', 'real men don't get check-ups for minor things' and 'real men don't have sex with condoms' kill very real men every day," she writes in The Guardian. "Our society's ideas on masculinity are some of our most **intractable**, and our culture often values the preservation of certain concepts of masculinity over life itself," she declares.

As the reality of climate change finally gets our full attention and we cry out for inventive solutions, maybe, as a society, we can learn to set aside those masculine mindsets that **bolster** attitudes towards problematic issues such as eating meat and driving large cars. They have undoubtedly **stunted** progress and innovation, something that could ultimately prove to be disastrous for us all.

Written by ECP coach Rob Hextall

You can read Katrine Marçal's article [here](#)



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5 great travel expressions

1. To travel/pack light

This means you can't take a lot of things with you on a trip. For example: "I only have a small suitcase, so I'll need to pack light."

2. To catch some rays

This means to spend time in sunlight, often by sunbathing. For example: "Let's go to the beach and catch some rays."

3. To live it up

When you are having a really good time and enjoying your holiday, without worrying about what you do or how much money you spend.

For example: "We're really going to live it up in Las Vegas next month!"

4. On a shoestring/on the cheap

This means that you are doing something without spending a lot of money or on a strict budget.

For example: "I'm going to travel around Europe on a shoestring. I'll be staying at hostels and buying food in supermarkets."