

A Real Rat Race

By [Michele A. Berdy](#)

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Офисный планктон: "office plankton," aka cubicle rats, office monkeys, desk jockeys

Every once in a while I fall in love at first sight with a Russian slang expression. Such was the case with *офисный планктон* (literally, "office plankton"). As soon as you hear it, you envision the workplace as a big aquarium with its big and little fish, a few sharks, several crabs and a whale or two — all chewing up the plankton, that mass of indistinguishable workers that keeps the system functioning. Brilliant!

Офисный планктон has a bad rep with people outside the workplace or at the top of the corporate food chain. The phrase is sometimes used as a synonym for *офисное быдло* (office rabble) and means low-level white-collar workers who spend most of their time at work drinking coffee, chatting with their co-plankton, texting and bungling the few mindless tasks they are assigned.

When the boss wanders by, they do *ИБД* (*имитация бурной деятельности* — an imitation of frenetic activity). But people who self-identify with *офисный планктон* don't think

of themselves as slackers or bottom feeders. They see themselves as the helpless prey of the office sharks (aka top management) who are overloading them with busy-work without even ensuring that they have a functioning copier.

The folks who make up the plankton are different from another form of office life — канцелярская крыса (paper pusher; literally, "office rat"). These are the people who produce reams of paperwork and are constantly scurrying around getting it signed, registered or couriered to another rat in another office. Often officious, pedantic and humorless, this kind of rodent will make you redo a 12-page document at 6:05 p.m. over a barely visible smudge on page four.

The сетевой хомячок (Internet hamster) is another creature altogether. Хомяки have long been part of Russian computer slang, based on similarities of sound with various non-Russian words. For example, хомяк was first slang for a home page on a site and then became a term for a personal home page on a blog. It also seems to have been provider-slang for a home user and programmer slang for a variety of software. And then хомяк has always been used to describe a hoarder — think hamster cheeks full of food.

Somewhere along the way the diminutive хомячок began to be used with the adjective сетевой (network, Internet) to describe a pale-faced, obsessive blogger and social network user — the kind of person who spends all of his or her time under artificial light, dashing off blog posts and scurrying from one virtual acquaintance to another.

This little hamster became very famous on Dec. 5, when opposition leader Alexei Navalny shouted from the stage at the demonstration for fair elections: "Я сетевой хомячок, и я перегрызу глотку этим скотам!" (I'm an Internet hamster and I'll chew through the throats of those swine!)

But Prime Minister Vladimir Putin saw the demonstrators as animals of a different sort. In December of last year, he jokingly addressed them this way: Идите ко мне, бандерлоги! (Come to me, Bandar-log!). If you haven't read any children's lit lately, the Bandar-log is a tribe of scatterbrained and unruly monkeys in Rudyard Kipling's "The Jungle Book." At the next demonstration, Navalny greeted the crowd with: "Привет бандерлогам от сетевых хомячков!" (Greetings to the Bandar-log from the Internet hamsters!)

Hamsters, monkeys, rats, plankton ... Is that any way to talk about human beings?

Just sayin'.

Michele A. Berdy, a Moscow-based translator and interpreter, is author of "The Russian Word's Worth" (Glas), a collection of her columns.

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