

Small Talk in Business



Lesson for Today

BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Small talk is a short, informal, and friendly conversation. It can take place among people who know each other or strangers. It is commonly used at networking and social events (at the office, meetings, and conferences).

A lot of people say that they hate small talk. We think it's complicated, stressful, uncomfortable, dull, or meaningless.



The importance of small talk

TO TALK OR NOT TO TALK?



IS IT NECESSARY?

You can't be friends with someone you don't know yet. So how do you make a transition from introducing yourself to a new team member to having a weekly lunch date on Tuesdays with someone you work with?

THE ANSWER TO THAT IS SIMPLE. SMALL TALK.

While this habit may make you feel awkward and uncomfortable - the dividends are too valuable to ignore.

The importance of small talk

NOT THAT SMALL



WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

Small talk is the pathway to learning something new about a coworker, finding a meaningful connection with someone, discovering a potential new friendship, and having fun in a conversation.

WHAT DO THE STUDIES SAY?

Dr. Justine Coupland is an expert in the field of sociolinguistics, which is the study of language in relation to social factors. In her book, "Small Talk", she provides a comprehensive analysis of the powerful and positive effect that small talk has on social interactions. She writes, "Small talk cannot be dismissed as peripheral, marginal or minor discourse. Small talk is a means by which we negotiate interpersonal relationships. This is a crucial function with significant implications for ongoing and future interactions."

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SO WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

- You Have No Idea Where It Will Go. Small talk is a gift rarely found in nature or the financial markets: It is a free option - that is, an investment with no initial cost, no risk (other than a temporarily bruised ego) and unlimited upside. Small talk can lead to a host of outcomes, from a merely pleasant exchange to the signing of multimillion-dollar business deal. When a free option comes along, you take it - every time.
- It Makes You Smarter. A recent study by researchers at the University Of Michigan found that friendly, social interaction can boost our ability to solve problems - as, say, working a crossword puzzle might. That's because, as Oscar Ybarra, a psychologist at the university explained: "Some social interactions induce people to try to read others' minds and take their perspective on things." ("Social" being the operative word: When conversations had a competitive edge, cognitive performance didn't budge.) For the full study, [click here](#).
- It Feels Good. Some days the very thought of returning a verbal volley can feel exhausting. Think about it, though: How many times did a little light banter leave you feeling...a little lighter? Humans are social beings: We crave connection---that's why Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg is worth \$17.5 billion---and small talk, while maybe not scintillating, is a way to connect.

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SO WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

- It Opens Your Eyes. Small talk makes you pay attention. Yoga types call it “living in the present.” I call it “putting down your stupid smart phone long enough to have a conversation with a human being in three dimensions.” Whatever you call it, it’s a good thing.
- You’ll Be Liked. If you want, as the book says, to make friends and influence people, being liked is important. People like people who are generous (and confident) enough to engage them. Small talk isn’t just about being gregarious or entertaining - it’s a gesture of respect.
- You Have No Choice. Getting a job, working with colleagues, winning new clients, entertaining existing ones---all of it requires small talk. Want to be on a path to the 1%? Better have the gift of gab. As Scott Hoover, associate professor of finance at Washington and Lee University, writes in his excellent primer *How To Get A Job On Wall Street*: “In trying to generate business, the deal pitch is obviously critical. What is not so obvious is that simple, seemingly innocuous conversation with potential clients can be just as important. Companies want to hire people who can think on their feet.”

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A STORY TIME

Nicholas Epley, a professor of behavioral science at the University of Chicago, takes it a step further. He agrees with Aristotle's famous argument that "man is by nature a social animal." He has observed that feeling socially connected increases happiness and health, whereas feeling disconnected is depressing and unhealthy. His research supports these observations.

He conducted a study about small talk with daily commuters on the Chicago Metro railroad line. In one experiment he divided research subjects into three different groups. In one group he asked commuters to refrain from speaking to other commuters. He asked another group to initiate conversation with another passenger. A final group received no instruction.

Epley reported these results in an article for the Chicago Tribune. "Commuters asked to interact with other passengers reported having the most pleasant commute. Commuters asked to enjoy their solitude reported the least pleasant commute. We found the same results among both introverts and extroverts."

Cultural differences

AMERICANS LOVE SMALL TALK

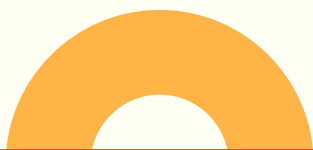
While Americans, in general, can easily pursue small talk with strangers, in some other cultures these conversations could be distinguished as a waste of time.

SMALL TALK VARIES COUNTRY TO COUNTRY AND PEOPLE TO PEOPLE

Southern Europeans, for example, are said to be very good at using lots of words to convey very little information. Also, small talk rules and topics can differ widely between cultures. Weather is a common topic in regions where the climate has great variation and can be unpredictable. Questions about the family are usual in some Asian and Arab countries. In cultures or contexts that are status-oriented, such as China, Latin America, and Japan, small talk between new acquaintances may feature an exchange of questions that enable social categorization of each other.

WHAT IS TABOO?

Differences among members of various cultural groups in aspects of their attitudes to small talk and ways of dealing with small talk situations are considered to be rooted in their socioculturally ingrained perception of interpersonal relationships. In many European cultures, it is common to discuss the weather, politics, or the economy, although in some countries personal finance issues such as salary are considered taboo. Finland has been cited as a country where there is little culture of small talk and people are more comfortable with silence, and Sweden is as well.



How to start?



INTRODUCE YOURSELF

We all can do that! No matter how shy you are, or how bad you think your English may be, or how difficult you find small talk to be.

This is just simply:

Hi, my name is Justyna. What's your name?

MAKE A CONTEXT COMMENT

Context comment is a conversation about the exact situation you are in or the environment around you. This can be a comment about the current weather, a painting of the conference room you are in or coffee you are drinking at this specific moment. Such a context comment is a good ice-breaker.

- Hmm, this coffee tastes really good!
- What beautiful weather we have today, I wonder if this is going to last till the weekend.

However, a context comment is just a comment, and though this is a good ice-breaker, this can't keep the conversation going

How to start?



MOVE TO NEXT STEP

Move the conversation to the next step and find the good/real topic to talk about.

You can do that best by asking questions. Even better when you can ask question that will get people to start talking about themselves.

- Is this your first time in New York?
- Did you see the game last night?

Prepare yourself a list of at least 5 topics that would be relevant to the situation you are in.

If the conversation you started does not seem to be rolling – as some people may just answer “I’m not a sports fan” and that’s it! – just start another topic!

Don’t be discouraged!

SHOW INTEREST

When people are answering your questions, it is good to show that you are interested in answers and you really listen.

Ask follow up questions, but you can also react to what people say by saying below example sentences:

- Hmm, this is really interesting!
- Yes, I see what you mean!
- I see what you’re saying!
- Totally agree!
- Really? This must have been very interesting!
- Oh, that was unexpected!
- Wow, what an amazing story!
- Ohhh, I would like to try that too!
- I would like to do that!
- How interesting!

At the office



EVERYDAY ROUTINE AND ONBOARDING

Chitchat is part of everyday office life. It's easier to talk to people you spend 8 hours a day with. But even at the office, there might be situations when you need to talk to strangers, for instance, when there's a new person in the company, and you need to make them familiar with the rest of your team. Sometimes you are the new one.

HAPPENS EVERYWHERE

Small talk happens everywhere - at the physical office, the most common places for it are the kitchen or corridors. You can chat by the desk as well but be aware that long (and loud) conversations in open spaces disturb other people around.

Working from home makes meaningless and off-topic discussions harder - that makes them even more important. Don't hesitate to spend a couple of minutes discussing yesterday's game or today's weather with your boss or colleagues.

11 office small talk ideas



1. Ask for help

- Hi! Could you help me with...?
- I was wondering if you know how...?
- Do you know where I can find...?
- Do you know how to...?

2. Offer help

- If you need anything my office is just around the corner!
- Let me know if I can help you with anything.

3. Welcome someone new at the company

- Hi! How are you settling in? (settle in – a nice way of asking someone how they are feeling in new situation)

4. Ask about the past weekend or plans for upcoming weekend

- Going anywhere for the weekend?

5. Bring up current cultural news

- I was surprised Nomadland has won Oscar for best picture. Have you seen it?

11 office small talk ideas



6. Discuss most current events/news/sports
 - Have you seen the game the other night?
 - Kindergartens are open again, what a relief!
7. Know and discuss industry/business news
 - I saw Apple is going to release a bunch of new devices next month.
 - I've heard taxes will be lowered next year. Do you know anything about it?
8. Context topics – use the office space and surroundings
 - Have you seen the new coffee machine in the kitchen?
 - It's quite loud in the open space today, isn't it?
9. Ask questions about the area (shops, where to eat lunch etc)
 - Where can I eat lunch?
 - What is the best place to buy some lunch nearby?
10. Ask open-ended questions
 - What do you think about the latest strategy update?
11. Ask others to join you in doing something
 - I'm going to the kitchen to grab some coffee, are you going too?
 - I heard there are some birthday sweets from Ann in the kitchen, anyone wants to go to grab some?

At the office

THIS MAY SOUND FUNNY, BUT THE MOST COMMON TOPIC OF SMALL TALK AT WORK IS WORK!



AFTER SAYING “HELLO” OR “HI!” YOU CAN TRY SOME OF THE BELOW QUESTIONS:

- How’s your morning going so far?
- How’s your day been?
- How’s your day been going?
- How’s your morning been going?
- How’s your afternoon been going?
- Has your day been busy so far?
- My afternoon’s been kind of slow. How’s yours going?

IF YOUR QUESTIONS ARE MORE SPECIFIC, YOUR COLLOQUES, WHEN ANSWERING CAN GIVE YOU MORE SPECIFIC ANSWERS THAN JUST – „ALL GOOD” OR “GOING WELL SO FAR”

Below a few standard answers to these questions:

- This morning has been pretty busy, but this is OK for me.
- Things are going slowly today, so I’m helping Ann with her documents updates.
- I’m focused on the presentation for the Senior Director as we have finalized this big project. Really excited about that!

At company lunch or dinner

KEEP THE CONVERSATION PROFESSIONAL

Even though business lunch is a social event, it's also an extension of the workplace. While it's expected that you socialize more than you do at the office, you should also keep the conversation professional. Whether you're dining with co-workers, your supervisor or a client, your behavior during the lunch influences your workplace interactions with these people.

WHAT OTHER THEN WORK-RELATED SUBJECTS?

- Have you been to this restaurant before?
- (if yes to above) Do you recommend something they have in the menu?
- The set menu looks very good. What would you recommend?
- This restaurant seems very popular. Is it also popular at weekends?
- Do you usually have lunch at the office or go out for lunch?
- Which cuisine do you like the most?
- Do you cook?
- Do you like Italian/Chinese/Indian/Sea food? I can recommend great restaurants downtown.
- (if you are in a different city or country and brave enough to try new things!) – Is there anything local you recommend/I should try? Do you recommend any typical dish for this town/region/country?
- Have you ever tried Polish cuisine? (dumplings?)
- Have you ever tried... ? (mention some unconventional food)
- (if you know someone has kids and you have kids too) – My kids could eat pizza/hot dogs/chips all day, every day. Same for yours?

People can also ask questions to you. Prepare a few topics on food in general, you can discuss what was the most challenging dish you prepared yourself, or which cuisine you like most and why. If you don't like something and you were asked about this – don't say "I hate it. It looks disgusting". Say rather something like "I've tried this once and I'm not a big fan of it. I prefer more...." or "I've never had the courage to try it"

At client meeting

SMALL TALK CREATES THE BOND WITH YOUR CLIENT!

Even the most outgoing people struggle when it comes to making small talk with people they barely know. Especially when that small talk is just killing time before you ask for something—and mostly that something is money.

DO YOUR RESEARCH

- Make sure you go into every new conversation with a few small talk options beyond the generic stuff. Think about information they've provided you in the past about their hobbies or families, or if necessary, stalk their social media. And do it in a way that's not at all sketchy.
- For example, let's say you're looking at my LinkedIn profile before your first call with me. You could talk about similar interests: "I saw in your bio you're into yoga. I took my first yoga class last week and it was amazing!"
- Or, you might notice where I went to school: "I don't mean to be creepy but I noticed you went to Cardiff University—did you happen to overlap with [Person's Name]?"
- Or, you might come across my recent activity: "I saw your company was just featured on one of Fast Company's 'Most Innovative' lists—congratulations! Did your office celebrate at all?"

AVOID OPENING WITH BUSINESS

Why? For one thing, it's disrespectful. It shows you care more about closing a deal and hitting your own goals than you care about the client's needs and interests. And yes, I know that at the end of the day, you're not spending time with this person for fun. But in the same way, you wouldn't walk into an interview and start with, "Here's a list of the skills that make me qualified..." you have to ease into the conversation.



At client meeting

AVOID OPENING WITH BUSINESS PART 2

In addition, you'll miss out on the opportunity to build a stronger, longer-lasting relationship. You may think you only need to get them to like you now, but who knows what this relationship could lead to? Maybe they move on to another company and you find yourself having to resell to them. Or, maybe you're looking to find a new job and they could serve as a great reference. Consider the long-term and put real effort into your small talk.

KEEP IT PROFESSIONAL

Like I said, this is ultimately a meeting about business, so make sure you're being appropriate. Hint: Avoid bringing up anything that's incredibly personal or controversial

GO GENERIC WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS

If the person's still not opening up to you—say, they only said a quick “good” when you asked how their weekend was—you have my permission to pull out the basics. And by basics, I'm talking about the weather. It can be as simple as saying, “It's pouring rain here, but I hear it's going to get nicer later in the week so I'm looking forward to going to the park this weekend!”

I love to ask the clients, “What would you be doing today if you didn't have to go to work?” This breaks them out of their shell a bit and helps you get to know their personality a bit more.



At conference or training

Now, imagine a situation that you've been working for the company for a few months and you are asked to participate in a conference or training. With a group of people from other offices around the world you need to discuss the plan for the critical project.

The meeting can take place same city you work or you can be asked to travel. You will need to spend a few days with people you don't know or maybe only talked over the phone or exchanged emails. And here it starts, you enter the conference room, and there are still a few minutes left before the meeting starts.

And the room is full of strangers...
Does it sound like a horror movie scene to you? ;)

If yes, you definitely need to learn and practice several questions and topics, which will help you to make small talk like a professional.

HOW TO INTRODUCE YOURSELF?



<https://www.speakconfidentenglish.com/introductions-for-work-in-english/>

At conference or training

THERE ARE SEVERAL BASIC TOPICS YOU CAN ASK ABOUT:

places - countries - cities

- Where are you based?
- I work in the city X, and where are you based?
- Where are you from?
- Oh, you are from XYZ! If I'm there what is it that I can't miss seeing?
- Is this your first time in Y?
- How do you usually spend summer in Y?

travel

- How was your trip?
- How was your flight? How long did it take?
- Do you have to travel a lot for work?

hotel

- Which hotel are you in?
- Where are you staying while you're here?

weather

- Oh, you are from XYZ! What's the weather like there now?

work

- Which team are you in?
- What's your area?
- How did you choose to work in IT/Development/Project Management?
- Are you here by yourself or with colleagues?
- How long have you been working for this company?
- Are you presenting today?
- What's your role on this project?

At conference or training

DURING THE BREAK:

- What do you think about the last presentation?
- How did you like the discussion about....?
- How do you find this meeting so far?
- I've heard John is going to present later, do you know what's his

You can say:

- I'm going to grab some coffee, do you want to join?
- I'm going to grab some coffee, can I bring you something?

IF YOU ORGANISE THE CONFERENCE

You can welcome your visitors by introducing yourself and asking these questions for example:

- How was your trip/flight?
- Did you find your way here all right?
- Did you have any problems getting here from the airport?

Then you can offer something to drink or offer a small office tour.

- Would you like some tea or coffee?
- Would like to see the office?
- Ask how long are they staying and if they will have time for visiting the city?
- You can recommend places to visit or restaurants to eat at.

After the small talk, it's time for the business

- Shall we start the meeting?
- Whenever you're ready, we can start
- Shall we go to the meeting room?

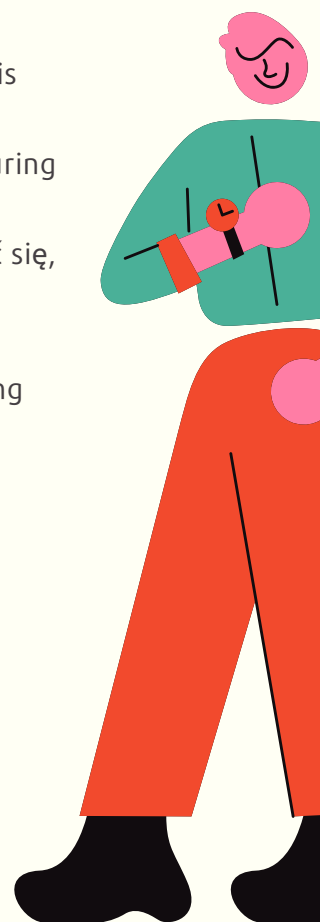
How to finish?

AT THE OFFICE YOU CAN ALWAYS SAY:

- Nice talking, but I would better get back to work
- I would love to talk longer, but I have a conference call with a client in 10 minutes
- I won't keep you any longer...
- It's been great catching up, but...
- I know you must be very busy so I won't keep you any longer
- It was good catching up, see you later.
- Nice chatting with you, but I'll leave you to do your work now.
- OK, I've got lots of emails to catch up on. Let's talk later!

AT THE MEETING OR CONFERENCE:

- It's been great talking to you, but I will grab some coffee before the meeting starts.
- Oh, I can see everyone is taking their places, so we better go too
- I'm so happy we talked. Thanks for sharing this story about XYZ. It was great!
- I'm so happy we met; thanks for sharing the news about John! Great to hear his company is doing so well!
- I can see the meeting is starting now, but I would love to continue our chat during lunch break!
- I'm going to mingle a bit. Can I introduce you to someone? (mingle – wmieszać się, zazwyczaj w grupę innych ludzi)
- I just noticed my colleagues have arrived; I would better go to say hello!
- I think I haven't said hello to the host yet; I would better go before the meeting starts!



Topics to be avoided

FINANCES

Asking personal financial questions of people that you have just met is inappropriate. It is OK to ask what someone does for work or what the positive aspects are of that career, but do not ask questions about salary. Most people will find this question intrusive and inappropriate.

POLITICS AND RELIGION

The problem with talking about politics is that you never know who in the crowd may have strong opinions. Stay away from this topic unless you want to risk ending up in the middle of a heated conversation. Religion is another highly personal and potentially sensitive topic that should be avoided.

SEX

Talking about sex or asking questions of an intimate nature is inappropriate during small talk. Avoid talking openly about sex or making sexual innuendos when talking with strangers. Both are likely to make others uncomfortable.

DEATH

Death is another heavy topic that should be avoided during small talk. When you are in the company of strangers, do not bring up emotional issues that have the potential to be upsetting.

PERSONAL GOSSIP

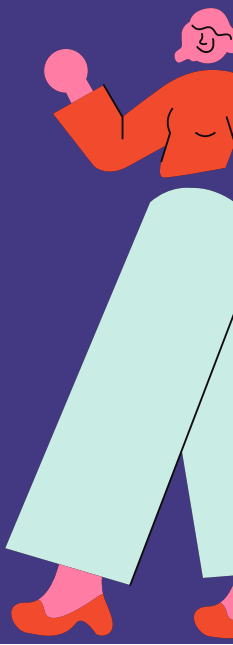
While celebrity gossip is fair game during small talk, gossip about people that you know personally is not. Gossiping about others not only paints you in a bad light, but you never know who might know each other. Avoid bad-mouthing others.

OFFENSIVE JOKES

Save your sensitive jokes for your best friends (or better yet, replace them with jokes that don't have time and place restrictions). In particular, making sexist or racist jokes is offensive and a quick way to end a conversation with strangers.

NARROW TOPICS

Avoid talking at length about one-sided topics. This might include specialized expertise in a particular field or unique hobbies of which your conversation partner has no knowledge.



Our tips

TESTED ON HUMANS ;-)

START WITH A COMPLIMENT

I love that sweater. Is it new? Those are cute shoes. Where'd you get them? That drawing is fantastic. Are you an artist on the side? What we're really doing is trying to start a conversation. And this strategy helps us start those small talk conversations in a really polite and positive way.

ENGAGING QUESTIONS

This is easier than it sounds.

A good approach is to use questions that encourage someone to talk and talk and talk and talk. The more someone else talks, the more we learn, and it's easier to find more engaging, in-depth questions and find connections.

After that short question, a better small talk question that encourages conversation might be, what do you like about working here? It isn't easy to give a one-word answer to that question. When you ask engaging questions, not only will you get longer answers, but the conversation will be more fun, and it will be easier to keep it going with follow-up questions.

ASK FOR ADVICE

Everyone loves to give their advice, their recommendations, and their opinions. So these are highly successful ways to get a conversation going. "I'd love to find out where the best places to get coffee are around here. What's your favorite near the office?"

Summary

RECAP 1

The importance
of Small Talk

RECAP 2

Cultural differences

RECAP 3

Ideas for Small Talk

RECAP 4

Our tips and advice



Tasks for you

WE'VE DONE OUR JOB, SO IT'S TIME FOR YOU ;-)

★ Task 1

Watch the videos of your interest:

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL2fUZ7TZy_xe1io_lv1ZHehYf8Mp5lX7P



★ Task 2

Somebody at work asked you how your day is going. Answer that question with a few sentences showing that you are busy today.

★ Task 3

Please watch the Simon Sinek's video again:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qpnNsSyDw-g>



Tasks for you

★ Task 4

You see your colleague at the cafeteria, and she has an excellent suntan. How would you start the small talk?

★ Task 5

You are at the meeting with the client. You know your client recently was rewarded best in business XYZ – how would you start the conversation based on this knowledge?

★ Task 6

Your colleague at the office talks to you for a bit too long, and you have an important project to finish before the end of the day. How would you end the conversation?

★ Task 7

Write down one thing from our presentation that you find the most revealing:

.....

.....

.....

.....

Thank You

FOR TAKING PART IN THIS PRESENTATION

See you on Just Take a Lesson's Instagram profile!



Sources:

<https://www.forbes.com/>
<https://hbr.org/>
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Small_talk