

small talk in the workplace

Effective communication skills within the workplace are crucial to business success. But effective communication is not always snappy and information focused. One area that is often treated as irrelevant or may seem on the surface a waste of time is small talk.

Small talk should not be sneered at though, as it is serving an important function: small talk lubricates the business wheels and keeps the workplace running smoothly. In all the workplaces we observed, small talk was an important component in maintaining good relationships between co-workers.

The Language in the Workplace Project team has studied interactions in a range of workplaces from government departments to commercial organisations and factories to discover the important role small talk plays for New Zealanders at work.

small talk is important and useful

- It is an important part of the regular social contact between workers;
- It signals friendly intentions and establishes good relations for subsequent business talk;
- It is a safe way to fill gaps and pauses at work;
- When you meet someone in the lift, or in a queue to make a xerox or send a fax, or while waiting to see someone, it is friendly to use small talk;
- The content is not important – it is the friendly tone of voice and the fact that it occurs that matters.

how people use small talk

- Small talk is most appropriate at the beginning and at the end of events, or when natural gaps between tasks occur;
- Extended small talk is usually considered inappropriate when time is short, but a brief social comment on an innocuous topic is often welcome to break the ice at even the most formal meeting;
- Some topics such as work, the weather, sport, and current events are suitable in almost all situations;
- Personal topics such as enquiries about partners and children occur more often between people who know each other reasonably well;
- Small talk tends to disappear in two circumstances: when there is an urgent deadline, and when relationships are strained.

some tricky issues

- People from different cultures may have different 'rules' about when and how to make small talk. For example, someone from Malaysia may ask *Have you eaten?* when they bump into you, in the same way that a European may ask *How are you?* without expecting a detailed answer. And in some cultures, it is impolite to start talking business without some social talk first, while for others, small talk is redundant in this context.
- People sometimes misunderstand the function of small talk, and take it too literally. A common example is when someone provides a very long and detailed answer to a polite enquiry such as *How are you?* or *What have you been up to today?*
- While small talk is generally positive, it can sometimes have a sharp edge, or it may be taken the wrong way. It is important to think carefully about the context, the tone of voice and the relationship between people when we are using and interpreting small talk.

important things to remember

- Don't underrate small talk;
- Small talk is a very important component of staff relations;
- Small talk can save you time because it ensures friendly relations and signals good intentions at work;
- Social formulas have an important role in every workplace.

about the project

The Language in the Workplace Project aims to identify the characteristics of effective interpersonal communication in business contexts. To date the project has recorded and analysed over 2000 interactions in 16 government and private sector organisations. Some features of workplace talk we are currently investigating include:

<i>Directives</i>	What is the most effective way of getting things done?
<i>Miscommunication</i>	How do people prevent or fix misunderstandings?
<i>Style shifting</i>	How do people adapt their talk to their audience?
<i>Email</i>	What role does email play in workplace communication?
<i>Problem solving</i>	How do people collaborate to solve problems or complete tasks?
<i>Meetings</i>	What structures and processes are typical of effective meetings?
<i>Humour and small talk</i>	How does "social talk" work as a communication tool?
<i>Workplace culture</i>	How is an organisation's culture reflected in their communication?
<i>Knowledge work</i>	How is knowledge created and advanced through talk?

The Research Team

School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies, Victoria University

Professor Janet Holmes, Project Director

Maria Stubbe, Research Fellow

Dr Bernadette Vine, Corpus Manager

Meredith Marra, Research Officer

Associated researchers and workplace practitioners
throughout New Zealand and the world

We would like to express our thanks to those who allowed us to record their interactions

Where can I get more information?

Visit our website to see a list of our publications and the latest project information:
<http://www.vuw.ac.nz/lals/lwp/>

You can contact the project team at:
Language in the Workplace Project, School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies
Victoria University of Wellington, PO Box 600, WELLINGTON
Tel: (04) 463 5600 Fax: (04) 463 5604
Email: Janet.Holmes@vuw.ac.nz or Maria.Stubbe@vuw.ac.nz

Funded by the New Zealand Foundation for Research, Science and Technology

