

## Small talk at work<sup>1</sup>

Based on an original article entitled 'Doing Collegiality and Keeping Control at Work:

Small Talk in Government Departments' by Janet Holmes

Edited By Nicola Daly

Can you remember what you said to the first person you saw at work today? Or the last thing you said yesterday? It was unlikely to be anything very business-focussed. Maybe it was something like this exchange between Jock and Pam at the start of the day.

### Example (1)

*Context:* Jock and Pam pass in the corridor.

- 1 Jock: morning Pam
- 2 Pam: hi Jock nice day
- 3 Jock: yeah great

This kind of talk is often called 'small talk', a name which suggests that this kind of talk is not valued very highly in society. It is usually regarded as fairly marginal in importance, and supremely dispensable. Perhaps especially so in a workplace setting where everyone is supposed to be focused on working.

Just how common is small talk in a workplace setting? Our research in New Zealand workplaces showed that it was very common. We found it at the start and end of working days, but also at the start and end of individual interactions within a day. There was a lot of small talk going on.

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<sup>1</sup> This article reports findings from a research project entitled 'Language in the Workplace' being conducted in the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies at Victoria University of Wellington by Professor Janet Holmes, Maria Stubbe, Bernadette Vine, Meredith Marra and a team of research assistants and associates. The research began in 1996 and is supported by a grant from the New Zealand Foundation for Research, Science and Technology. The project's long term goals are to contribute to the development of more effective interpersonal communication in New Zealand workplaces.

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At the start of the day or of an interaction people often made reference to the weather (*lovely day*), recent shared activities (*great concert last night*), and of course the ubiquitous *how are you?*. And at the end of interactions, small talk was also common. It might be a brief *see you later* or *give us a bell* ('phone me').

Talk about holidays and leisure activities at the start of a conversation provided a gentle introduction to work talk. In this situation small talk appears to help get the interaction underway. Small talk at the end of a conversation seems to act to affirm the relationship between the two in the conversation and to soften their imminent parting.

We also found that small talk was used as a kind of 'time filler' in conversations. Just think of what people do when there is some kind of interruption in a meeting. It doesn't take long for a little buzz of small talk to start up. Small talk appears to be able to expand or contract according to need. It can be picked up and dropped with minimal effort, and seems to be used to fill "dead" time in the workplace, or to fill a gap between planned activities.

### **Doing collegiality**

But why do we need to do this? How would it be if we only spoke about work related issues, and never asked how someone was, or how their holiday went. Would we be more efficient? In order to answer this question, we need to consider what it is that small talk is doing.

Apart from allowing us to be aware of when an interaction is beginning or ending, small talk is also important in constructing, expressing, maintaining and reinforcing interpersonal relationships between people who work together. In the workplace the exchange of greetings, complaints about how busy life is, promises to get in touch for lunch, coffee, and so on, are examples of small talk that support interpersonal relationships.

### **Example (2)**

*Context:* Joan and Elizabeth pass in the corridor

- 1 Elizabeth: hi Joan
- 2 Joan: hi how are you
- 3 Elizabeth: oh busy busy busy
- 4 Joan: mm terrible isn't it

### **Example (3)**

*Context:* Jon and May pass on the stairs

- 1 Jon: hello hello /haven't seen you for a while\
- 2 Mary: /hi \
- 3 well I've been a bit busy
- 4 Jon: must have lunch sometime
- 5 Mary: yea good idea give me a ring

In these extracts, small talk enables these workmates to "do collegiality". In both examples the work mates are indicating that they feel positively towards the other. In the first extract this is shown by Joan commiserating with Elisabeth's busyness. Reference to how busy you are is ideal small talk for the workplace. It simultaneously shows that you are a good 'worker', while also giving an acceptable excuse for your limited ability to do things like having lunch together. In the second extract both Jon and May show their positiveness towards each other by demonstrating a willingness to set aside time to get together socially. However, Jon's use of "sometime" in his invitation, is an indication of the largely symbolic status of the interchange, and this is mirrored in May's equally non-specific suggestion that he ring her; no precise time or date is mentioned.

These kinds of small talk can also serve a valuable bridging function, a means of transition to the main business of a workplace interaction. Small talk warms people up socially, oils the interpersonal wheels, and gets talk started on a positive note, before getting down to 'real' business talk.

### **Example (4)**

*Context:* Manager, Hana, with her PA, Beth, who has just returned after a holiday

- 1 Hana: well it's nice to have you back welcome back
- 2 Beth: yes had a very good holiday [tut]
- 3 Hana: and feel well rested? so where did you go
- 4 Beth: no [laughs]
- 5 Hana: oh well
- 6 Beth: it's just just been busy with my mum and then she had me take her
- 7 there and take her there and [laughs]
- 8 Hana: oh

- 9 Beth: so no it was good I didn't have to worry about meals I didn't have to  
10 worry about bills or kids or um work or anything just me  
11 Hana: (just) a holiday for you  
12 Beth: yeah + [tut] it was UNREAL [laughs]  
13 Hana: now listen are you going to be wanting to take time off during the  
14 school holidays

Example 4 is typical of the way people who work together re-establish contact after a time gap and it illustrates very nicely how small talk can lead into work-related talk: *now listen are you going to want to take time off during the school holidays* (line 13). This extract also shows the almost seamless flow between business talk and small talk that occurs in workplaces.

So in answer to the question *Would we be more efficient at work without all of the small talk that goes on?*, the answer is almost certainly *No!* All the evidence is that small talk plays an essential role in maintaining good interpersonal relationships in the workplace, and for this function alone it must be regarded as a very important part of workplace communication. Good work relations will have a positive flow on effect to the quantity and quality of work produced in a workplace.

### **Doing power**

Okay, so small talk is important, but if all we talked was small talk, we wouldn't get any work done. So who starts and stops small talk? When we were looking at this question, we noticed an interesting relationship between small talk and power in the workplace.

Here's an example. In the following extract, is Tom or Greg the boss?

### **Example (5)**

- 1 Tom: can I just have a quick word  
2 Greg: yeah sure have a seat  
3 Tom: [sitting down] great weather eh  
4 Greg: mm  
5 Tom: yeah been a good week did you get away skiing at the weekend  
6 Greg: yeah we did + now how can I help you  
7 Tom: I was just wondering if I could take Friday off and make it

a long weekend

It seems that the way that small talk is used in a workplace can tell us a great deal about who is 'boss'. In this extract it is Greg who cuts short the small talk to move onto the business talk. Quite plainly, Greg is Tom's superior. While New Zealand workplaces may seem very egalitarian on the surface, the management of small talk can tell us a lot about the power structure of a workplace.

From our study (and this is reflected in many overseas studies), it seems that apart from the first contact of the day, small talk is usually optional. But in interactions between workmates of unequal power it is generally the boss who either allows small talk or, as in the above example, cuts it short. In another example in our data, a senior policy analyst walked into the office of his administrative assistant saying *can you ring these people for me Joe*. Similarly a manager delivered a pile of papers to her PA saying *can you send these out, they need to go by this afternoon*. In these kinds of interactions the superiors did not use or expect small talk, and it did not occur. This is their prerogative, evidence of their power.

On the other hand, those in positions of power may use small talk to ease the transition to work-related topics, or to develop or maintain good social relations between themselves and their subordinates. In this way small talk can be used to reduce the social distance between superiors and their subordinates.

It is also possible for those in more powerful positions to deliberately use small talk to "manage" or influence the behaviour of others. So, for example, because small talk is associated with the end of an interaction, a senior person can use small talk as a strategy for bringing an interaction to an end. In example 6, Hana, a manager, signals to her PA that the business of the interaction is completed by switching to small talk.

### **Example (6)**

*Context:* Hana, a manager, is briefing her PA, Beth, on jobs to be done

- 1 Beth: (and) the election briefing
- 2 Hana: yeah oh ++ I think we've cancelled that ++ you might need to check
- 3 Beth: yeah
- 4 Hana: I'm fairly sure that's been cancelled ++ the panel on Friday afternoon's
- 5 been cancelled so everyone will just have to + cope on their own

- 6 Beth: (pardon)  
7 Hana: well it's nice to have you back welcome back  
8 Beth: yes had a very good holiday [tut]  
9 Hana: and feel well rested? so where did you go?

Hana finishes the "work" talk and then shifts to interpersonal social talk via a formulaic small talk greeting (line 7) *it's nice to have you back welcome back*. Its positioning suggests it is a signal of relaxation at the end of the task. Hana switches from a style associated with managing the task to paying more attention to the personal relationship between her and her P.A.

### **Conclusion**

So despite its name, our study of small talk in New Zealand workplaces shows just how indispensable small talk is. It helps us start and end conversations. It allows us to maintain good relationships with our workmates, and it enables power structures to be indirectly expressed and maintained. In fact, it is amazingly flexible and multifunctional.



Extracts (8) and (13) above illustrate workers warming up for the day's work interactions.

Within an interaction, too, small talk can serve the positively polite function of oiling the interpersonal wheels.

Another example occurs in the middle of an interaction between a manager and her PA who has been away for a period. The manager is recounting some of the problems she had explaining the filing system to the temporary replacement and she then says with a sigh of relief *oh it's nice to have you back*. This appreciative comment inserted in the middle of task-oriented talk, has the function of providing social oil, reasserting the importance of the sound and effective working relationship which has been developed between the two women. In such contexts, the small talk is clearly distinct from phatic communion; it is more than the production of a linguistic routine, a mere form of words. Rather it is a creatively adapted form of social talk.

### **Starting interactions**

Talk about holidays and leisure activities provide a gentle introduction to work talk. In these extracts, small talk serves what Laver calls an initiatory function of "getting the interaction comfortably underway" (1975: 221; see also Tannen 1994: 65).

### **Ending interactions**

The end of a workplace interaction is another important position for small talk which is attending to positive face needs. Laver suggests, phatic communion mitigates a possible sense of rejection and "consolidates" the relationship (1975: 232).

### **Space filling**

Another aspect of the boundary-marking function of small talk is its role as a transitional device or "time-filler" between different activities, as illustrated in (7) above. One of the most interesting features to emerge from the analysis of the distribution of small talk was its elasticity, flexibility and adaptability.



It can expand or contract according to need. It can be picked up and dropped with minimal discursual effort. It can be used to fill "dead" time in the workplace, or to fill a gap between planned activities.<sup>i</sup>

In all these cases, small talk filled a time gap with acceptable, and indeed valuable, relationship-maintaining social interaction, while also avoiding problematic disengagement issues when the "main activity" could be commenced or resumed. Because it is undemanding in terms of topic and intellectual content, and infinitely flexible in terms of length, small talk is ideally suited for these varied functions.

Here's an example of small talk in a workplace. What can you work out about the relationship between Diana and Sally from this?

**Example (1)<sup>ii</sup>**

*Context:* Diana enters Sally's office at the beginning of the day to collect mail

- 1 D: good morning Sally lovely day
- 2 S: yes don't know what we're doing here we should be out in the sun
- 3 D: mm pity about the work really
- 4 S: how are your kids?
- 5 D: much better thank goodness any mail?

The status of an exchange as small talk, and the variety of complex functions that such talk serves in everyday interaction in the workplace, are far from straightforward issues, as this paper will demonstrate.

The negative perception of small talk as marginal or purposeless reflects to some extent the way it is often defined, explicitly or implicitly, as talk which is *not* concerned with information, which is not "purposive" or task-oriented.

While the exchange clearly serves the social function of establishing initial contact between two co-workers on a particular day, it also serves a range of other functions, both affective and referential. It is not generally possible to parcel out meaning into neat packages of referential on the one hand and social or affective on the other. Talk is inherently multifunctional.

In approaching the definition of small talk at work, it is useful to conceptualise types of talk in terms of a continuum with “core business talk” at one end and phatic communion at the other. (See Figure 1).

So, talk which qualifies for classification at the core business end of the continuum is crucially informative, highly focused and "on-topic" in terms of the agreed meeting agenda for that particular meeting in that particular workplace, and it directly serves the organisation's goals.

At the other end of the continuum is phatic communion. At the extreme, this is talk which is independent of any specific workplace context, which is "atopical" and irrelevant in terms of workplace business, and which has relatively little referential content or information load.<sup>iii</sup> (4) provides an example.

#### **Example (4)**

*Context:* Jock and Pam pass in the corridor.

- 1 J: morning Pam
- 2 P: hi Jock nice day
- 3 J: yeah great

There is nothing about this exchange to locate it in terms of workplace or participants; and it is minimally informative.

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Although the extremes are relatively easy to identify, the point of suggesting that a continuum is involved is to highlight the fact that many workplace interactions do not fit neatly into the core categories of business talk and phatic communion. And, in particular, what I want to call "small talk" extends a considerable distance along the continuum from phatic communion towards core business talk. Figure 2 illustrates this point.

Typically, the discourse of a meeting (at least in this database) does not develop in a neat linear progression; rather talk moves on and off topic

Talk may gradually shift or drift along the continuum from on-topic business talk to talk which is not strictly relevant to the agenda for the interaction, but which is nevertheless work-related

### Example (8)

*Context:* two office workers at the beginning of the day

- 1 C: I went to Nelson over the holidays you know
- 2 N: oh this holiday?
- 3 C: mm
- 4 N: oh okay
- 5 C: first time for + well to have a look around it

After about four minutes discussing the holiday area, they move to a core business topic.

The exchange also illustrates the fact that the functions of talk are not fixed but rather they emerge out of the developing discourse. Exchanges develop in a variety of not always predictable ways, as (11) illustrates.

### Example (11)

*Context:* Manager, Hana, with her PA, Beth, who has just returned after a holiday

- 1 H: well it's nice to have you back welcome back
- 2 B: yes had a very good holiday [tut]
- 3 H: and feel well rested? so where did you go
- 4 B: no [laughs]
- 5 H: oh well
- 6 B: it's just just been busy with my mum and then she had me take her
- 7 there and take her there and [laughs]
- 8 H: oh
- 9 B: so no it was good I didn't have to worry about meals I didn't have to
- 10 worry about bills or kids or um work or anything just me
- 11 H: (just) a holiday for you
- 12 B: yeah + [tut] it was UNREAL [laughs]
- 13 H: now listen are you going to be wanting to take time off during the
- 14 school holidays

This is typical of the way people who work together re-establish contact after a time gap and it illustrates very nicely how small talk can lead into work-related talk: *now listen are you going to want to take time off during the school holiday* (line 13).

These extracts illustrate the inextricability of business talk from small talk: the continuum identified in our data is clearly an essential characteristic of talk in the organisations we examined.

Small talk is typically, but not exclusively, found at the boundaries of interaction, as well as at the boundaries of the working day. Greeting and parting exchanges which typically occur in the opening and closing phases of interactions are obvious manifestation of small talk. In the workplace, the first encounter of the day between work colleagues could be considered an obligatory site for small talk. Its absence at this point would be marked, justified perhaps by an emergency requiring urgent attention to a specific task. Initial encounters are typified by references to the weather (*lovely day*), recent shared activities (*great concert last night*), and ritual enquiries after well being (*how's things?*). Such exchanges between work colleagues occur in passing, as well as at the beginning of planned activities, and they appear to resemble small talk in other contexts in most crucial respects.

At the beginning of meetings in our data, for example, as people gathered together, small talk was common. In addition to its social functions (discussed in the next section), small talk filled in time while participants waited for the meeting to begin.

At the end of interactions, small talk was also common. It might be a brief *see you later* or *give us a bell* ('phone me'), or a more protracted disengagement, serving a range of functions, especially attention to positive face needs (see below for discussion of some extended examples). Small talk provides a transition assisting people to "come back to earth" as one contributor put it, after a session of hard work, or sometimes to re-establish cordial relations following an intense and perhaps heated debate. Even after a mundane, regular session of delegating tasks, small talk served to re-orient people to their personal rather than their role relationship.

### **Example (12)**

*Context:* Helen has been delegating jobs to Rebecca, her PA

- 1 R: I finally got + the the names transferred from the cvs onto the +
- 2 ont- onto the labels to send out the thank you letters yesterday
- 3 H: oh good (let's) get that one done..
- 4 R: okay
- 5 H: okay

6 R: and how's Sam

7 H: he's just fine

The preclosing sequence (lines 4-5) *okay okay* signals that the work is completed. Rebecca starts to leave and as she gathers up her papers asks about Helen's partner (line 6), a typical example of small talk at the end of a meeting. In this position small talk has the potential for development into more extended social talk, but equally it can be brief and formulaic, simply marking the end of the encounter.

Although small talk occurred most typically at the peripheries of workplace interactions, it also surfaced within work encounters

They enable speakers to move painlessly from social to transactional talk.

However, perhaps the one feature which distinguishes workplace discourse most clearly from social discourse in many other contexts is the fact that task-related interactions may open without small talk of any kind.

#### **Example (14)**

*Context:* Kate, a relatively senior person in the organisation addresses Anne, the computer adviser, as Anne walks through the office.

1 K: can I just talk to you

2 A: yeah

3 K: I got your message saying that you'd set up the Turner ID for me

4 A: yep

5 K: but I can't log on to it yet 'cause I don't have a + code number or anything

. Most obviously in our data, initial "greeting" small talk seems to be treated as dispensable in transactions which are signalled as brief requests for assistance or information, or where an agenda has been set in advance, and/or where participants are working according to agreed explicit time constraints. Initial small talk may also be dispensed with when participants have had some contact earlier on the day of a meeting. It is possible that this is

a feature which distinguishes small talk in the workplace from its occurrence in other contexts;

Finally the length of small talk exchanges reflects a wide variety of factors. The place and time are obvious influences. Where it occurs in the corridors in passing, it will be typically brief, performing its canonical function of creating and maintaining social relations within a broader context in which the primary avowed goals of the organisation predominate. So colleagues passing in a corridor tend to keep small talk exchanges brief, as illustrated in extract (4) above, and in (15).

### **Example (15)**

*Context:* Tom and Graeme pass in the corridor as Tom comes into the building

1 T : nice day out there

2 G: yeah great

Where it occurs in social venues such as morning tea or lunch breaks, small talk may be relatively expansive, providing a natural bridge to personal and social relationship discourse, as well as to the "shop talk" which dominates many tea and coffee breaks.<sup>iv</sup> Office-based small talk tends to reflect the influence of other factors such as how well the participants know each other, the relative status of participants, and how busy they are, as well as the norms of the organisational culture.

), Laver suggests a range of social functions of phatic communion, one end of the small talk continuum in figure 2 above. Within the opening phase he identifies three main functions: firstly, a "propitiatory function in defusing the potential hostility of silence in situations where speech is conventionally anticipated" (1975: 220); secondly, an "exploratory function", in that phatic communion "allows the participants to feel their way towards the working consensus of their interaction" (1975: 221); and, thirdly, an initiatory function, "it allows the participants to cooperate in getting the interaction comfortably under way" (1975: 221). In the closing phases of an interaction, phatic communion facilitates a cooperative parting, assuaging "any feelings of rejection" and "consolidating the relationship" (1975: 231). All of these social and interpersonal functions of phatic communion or small talk are very relevant in workplace interaction, as I will illustrate below.

The distinction between business talk and small talk is sometimes difficult to draw; there is a continuum from one to the other, with many different kinds of "off-topic" discourse functioning in interesting ways in between.

Small talk tends to occur at the boundaries of social encounters, though it may also occur at transition points within an interaction, or serve as a brief social intermission in a "full-on" work session.

The third section of the paper considered the functions of small talk. Small talk in the workplace functions like knitting. It can be easily taken up and easily dropped. It is a useful undemanding means of filling a gap between work activities.

This end-of-interaction small talk seemed to be used to help people to "come back to earth" as one contributor put it, after a session of hard work, or perhaps some disagreement. Even after a fairly ordinary work interaction (as in extract ?) we found small talk being used to re-establish "friendly" relations.

### **Example (12)**

*Context:* Helen has been delegating jobs to Rebecca, her PA

- 1 R: I finally got + the the names transferred from the cvs onto the +  
2 ont- onto the labels to send out the thank you letters yesterday  
3 H: oh good (let's) get that one done..  
4 R: okay  
5 H: okay  
6 R: and how's Sam  
7 H: he's just fine

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<sup>ii</sup> Throughout the paper, names have been changed to protect people's identity. Extracts have sometimes been slightly edited for ease of reading eg precise position of overlaps is generally not marked.

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<sup>iii</sup> Justine Coupland (pc) helpfully suggested that phatic communion is “atopical” rather than “off-topic”.

<sup>iv</sup> Note that, as some organisations recognise, social talk and the networking that it facilitates is just as important to the achievement of the organisation's goals as business talk - though its importance is not always acknowledged.