

## Was it something I said?

**Level:** Intermediate

**Time:** 90 minutes

**Summary:** This lesson is about the importance of small talk in the workplace.

In this lesson, students:

1. study a text on small talk, with advice on topics and expressions to avoid;
2. discover the top ten unacceptable small-talk topics in the US;
3. discuss their own experiences of making small talk and its challenges, especially in a foreign language;
4. practise making small talk.

**Materials:** One copy of the worksheet per student

**Group size:** Any

**Note:** This lesson plan is for both pre-experience and in-work business students based on an original article first published in *Business Spotlight* issue 2/2019.

### Warmer

Students answer the first two questions using the prompts if necessary. Then they discuss the third question and say whether the mention of the weather was a part of a 'serious' conversation or just small talk.

### Key words

Students match the key words with the definitions and then find the words in the article and notice how they are used in context. The words in the task are in the order that they appear in the article.

**Key:**

- |                    |                 |
|--------------------|-----------------|
| 1. anxiety         | 9. judgements   |
| 2. mundane         | 10. harsh       |
| 3. trending        | 11. crude       |
| 4. jeopardize      | 12. accusations |
| 5. conflict        | 13. griping     |
| 6. provoke         | 14. tedious     |
| 7. polarized       |                 |
| 8. confrontational |                 |

### Understanding the article

Students decide whether the statements are true or false according to the information in the article.

**Key:**

1. T
2. F
3. T
4. T
5. F
6. F
7. T
8. F

### Expressions

Students find expressions in the article, then use them in sentences of their own.

**Key:**

1. *at a loss for words*
2. *building a bridge*
3. *grab some grub*
4. *lack of restraint*
5. *a big no-no*
6. *harmless chit-chat*

### Unacceptable small-talk topics

Using the topics provided, students decide which small-talk topics they think Americans find the most inappropriate in the workplace and fill the gaps in the top ten list. Find out if students were surprised about the ranking or inclusion of any of the topics on the list and whether they think the list would look the same in their workplace.

**Key:**

- |     |                                 |
|-----|---------------------------------|
| 71% | <i>sex life</i>                 |
| 69% | <i>drug use</i>                 |
| 57% | <i>gossip about a colleague</i> |
| 42% | <i>salary or income</i>         |
| 39% | <i>sexual orientation</i>       |
| 38% | <i>race or ethnicity</i>        |
| 37% | <i>religion</i>                 |
| 35% | <i>gender identity</i>          |
| 31% | <i>politics</i>                 |
| 28% | <i>relationship issues</i>      |

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### Discussion

Students discuss the questions relating to the article and to small talk in general.

### Making small talk

Students use their charts to make brief notes about each of the topics. The notes will help them talk about each topic during the communication part of the task.

Ask the students to sit in two rows (row A and row B) opposite each other. When you give them a signal, students in row A start making small talk with their partner about any one of the topics on your chart. After about two minutes, tell them to stop. Students in row A tick the topic they just talked about and move one place to the right.

Then students in row B decide which topic to talk about with their new partner (and place a tick on their chart).

Students continue practising making small talk in this quick-fire way.

At the end of the task, students reflect on which topics were the easiest to talk about and which were the hardest. Find out which ones easily lead onto further conversation and which ones were more difficult to continue.

### Related topics on onestopenglish

In this Business Spotlight lesson plan, students are faced with the question 'Do you talk too much?'

[www.onestopenglish.com/business/business-spotlight/do-you-talk-too-much/551620.article](http://www.onestopenglish.com/business/business-spotlight/do-you-talk-too-much/551620.article)



## Was it something I said?

### Was it something I said?

by Julian Earwaker



**Small talk at work helps develop good relationships between colleagues. But what should we talk about? JULIAN EARWAKER looks into which topics are acceptable and which are taboo.**

**1** There's a song on the album *Green* by REM that refers to the inability to communicate. 'Pop Song 89' includes the lyrics, 'Should we talk about the weather? / Should we talk about the government?' You may know this feeling when you take a break at work and head for the office kitchen. You'd like to join your colleagues in conversation, but you're not quite sure what to say.

**2** Social anxiety can be a real problem in a large workplace, where you might not know many of your colleagues well. Even confident speakers are sometimes at a loss for words. That's where small talk comes in. "Small talk is about building a bridge between you and another person," says Arlin Cuncic of verywellmind.com. "It doesn't matter so much what you talk about but rather that you start talking." Practising small talk doesn't just help to develop relationships with colleagues; it also builds confidence for business meetings, conferences and training.

**3** Cuncic's number one small-talk topic? The weather, of course. "Although talking about the weather may seem mundane, it is a good neutral topic that everyone can discuss," she explains. "Did a big storm just blow through? Are you in the middle of a heatwave? Look no further than outside your door for some good conversation openers."

**4** What else is safe to talk about at work? Books, films, popular culture, television and trending topics are just a few easy ideas from meridianks.com to talk about with colleagues, especially at lunchtime. "Step away from the computer, grab some grub with a friend or colleague," advises the knowledge solutions website, "and most importantly, give your brain a break and stop talking about work!" Other areas suitable for discussion, it suggests, include sports, hobbies and interests.

Whatever the topic, always think before you speak, advises Devashish Chakravarty of *Business Today*. "Lack of restraint while communicating can be disastrous," he says. "Unlike family and friends, the workplace is unforgiving and you can jeopardize your career. There are certain topics that are best kept away from the workplace."

Entrepreneur.com reports studies showing that the strictest industries for conversation taboos are finance and insurance. If you work in hospitality, IT or manufacturing, you're likely to have more flexibility. The study shows that while workers are happy talking to colleagues about health, relationships and families, 74 per cent say the number one topic of conversation in American workplaces is politics. Perhaps that's no surprise, but is talking politics at work a good idea?

"Conflict at work is easy to provoke without adding politics to the mix," says Laura Johnson of The Institute of Leadership & Management in the UK. Here, Brexit has polarized opinion and is the number one water-cooler conversation topic. However, says Johnson, the confrontational nature of political debate should make it a big no-no for discussions with colleagues. "What starts out as harmless chit-chat inevitably turns into an impassioned debate," she explains. "When it comes to the state of our nation, it's hard not to get personal and almost impossible not to make judgements based on a workmate's political preferences."

Politics isn't the only subject that can lead to harsh judgements. Writing for Forbes.com, HR expert Liz Ryan lists ten topics never to talk about at work, including negative opinions about other employees and managers, employees' personal problems, unhappiness with your job and relationship dramas. Other things to avoid include sex, religion, hate speech and crude jokes. Safer territory for conversation with colleagues includes local news, restaurants and coffee shops, sports, events or shows you are planning to attend. Children and pets, travel and holidays are all safe topics, according to modis.com.

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It's not just the topic of conversation that matters, of course, but how we speak to colleagues. "'You always ...' and 'You never ...' are bad for relationships and bad for the workplace," says Miranda Pennington of TheJobNetwork.com. "Blanket accusations like this rarely have positive results." She also has another suggestion: avoid complaining too much. "Saying 'I'm soooooo tired' and griping

about your exhaustion level, unless you need some legitimate accommodation in your workload, is tedious." The same is also true when you get home from work. Pop songs are probably a safer topic of conversation with the family.

JULIAN EARWAKER is a freelance journalist, prison writer-in-residence and book author.

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### 3 Understanding the article

Are these sentences true (T) or false (F) according to the information in the article?

1. Brexit is a very common small-talk topic in the UK.
2. Confident people never have problems starting small talk.
3. Developing your small-talk skills can help you become successful in many aspects of your work life.
4. If you work in finance or insurance, there are more small-talk topics you should avoid than if you work in other, more relaxed industries.
5. In the US, most people avoid talking about politics at work.
6. It's not important what you talk about but only what language you use when you make small talk.
7. Small talk about politics can soon turn into a heated debate and cause people to make judgements about others.
8. The experts advise us not to talk about the weather as it is too mundane and tedious.

### 4 Expressions

a. Find expressions that match the descriptions in the article.

1. when you do not know what to say (five words, para 2) \_\_\_\_\_
2. finding something that you have in common with someone else (three words, para 2)  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. get something to eat (three words, para 4) \_\_\_\_\_
4. when you are unable to stop yourself from doing something (three words, para 5)  
\_\_\_\_\_

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5. something you should definitely not do (three words, para 7)

\_\_\_\_\_

6. small talk that does not hurt anybody (two words, para 7) \_\_\_\_\_

b. Use the expressions in sentences of your own.

### 5 Unacceptable small-talk topics

Which small-talk topics do you think Americans find most inappropriate in the workplace?  
Complete the top ten list using the topics below.

salary or income

gossip about a colleague

politics

religion

sex life

#### Not safe for work? Top ten workplace conversation topics Americans find inappropriate

71% \_\_\_\_\_

69% drug use

57% \_\_\_\_\_

42% \_\_\_\_\_

39% sexual orientation

38% race or ethnicity

37% \_\_\_\_\_

35% gender identity

31% \_\_\_\_\_

28% relationship issues



### 6 Discussion

- Find and highlight three good pieces of advice in the article. Talk about why you think this advice is useful.
- Talk about work-related situations you have been in, in which you needed to make small talk both in your own language and in English.
- Why do you think many people find making small talk difficult, especially in a foreign language?

## Was it something I said?

### 7 Making small talk

Make notes in the chart about each of the topics. Then practise making small talk and place a tick next to each topic when you have finished discussing it with a partner.

✓	small-talk topic	my notes
	weather	
	books	
	films / TV	
	music	
	politics	
	sports	
	family / pets	
	local news	