

3

Small talk

Unimportant details can pave (open) the way to close relationships.

— Peter Menzies

Aims

- How to find things to talk about with different people
- Learn a 'small talk' format that works
- Learn how to avoid talking about things that can cause offence
- Learn about the cultural fault lines that divide people
- How to write a letter of apology after causing offence

A

How to start a conversation

Quiz

Small talk describes the conversations you have when you are not talking business.

It is the conversations before the meeting, in the staff restaurant or around the water cooler.

Do you agree or disagree with these statements? Tick Yes or No.

	Yes	No
1 I'm good at small talk in my own language.		
2 I'm good at small talk in English.		
3 I think the social aspect of doing business is very important.		
4 I think small talk wastes time before and in meetings. I prefer to get down to business straight away.		
5 I enjoy talking to people outside business meetings.		
6 I prefer listening and observing to talking.		
7 I find it difficult to choose things to talk about when socializing in English.		
8 I know what to talk about and what not to talk about when socializing in English.		



Briefing

It is important to get to know people personally. This is often the best way to build a good relationship and trust. The best time to do this is often outside the meeting, over coffee or at mealtimes.

WHAT you talk about is important. When you deal with other cultures there is a danger that you may cause offence. You may say the wrong thing, be too personal or ask something that is OK in your culture but not in theirs.

In addition, you may ask questions that fit cultural stereotypes. You may fix people wrongly in a traditional cultural image that your country has of them. It is important to see the people you deal with as **PEOPLE**, not as representatives of a cultural stereotype. How can you do this?

Recognize that everyone has different areas of experience. These influence the way they are. The five main areas of experience are:

- **National experience** – the country they come from
- **Regional experience** – the area in the country they come from
- **Professional experience** – the work or studies they have done and the organizations where they have worked
- **Social experience** – their experience of working in different organizations
- **Personal experience** – education and travel

You want to know more about the person you are dealing with but you don't want to cause offence. Are there neutral questions you can ask?

'Get to know Jo' is an exercise to help you find out more about the people you meet without causing offence. There are six questions. If you ask them and follow up their answers with other questions, it will help you understand more about the background of the person you are dealing with.

National experience	Where are you from?
Regional experience	What part of (<i>country</i>) are you from? What's it like there?
Professional experience	Where did you work before you worked here?
Social experience	How was your last job different?
Personal experience	Have you travelled or studied abroad?

What is important is not just the questions but the follow-up questions you can ask because of what you learn from the answers to the first questions. Notice that we have asked questions about country, region, work and travel. In many countries people prefer you not to talk about family and social background. That may be too personal.



Listening

**1**

Listen to five conversations and decide which type of experience they are about.

- National experience
- Regional experience
- Professional experience
- Social experience
- Personal experience

Conversation	Experience
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	

**2**

Listen again to the five conversations and note down the follow-up questions.

What other questions could you use as follow-up questions in these five conversations?
Think about additional questions you might like to ask.

Business practice

**1**

Listen and repeat these questions.

National experience

Where are you from?
Where do you come from?
Do you mind my / me asking where you are from?

Regional experience

What part are you from?
What's special about your region?

Professional experience

What did you do before you came here?
How long have you worked here?
When did you start work here?

Social experience

How is this job different to / from your last one?

Personal experience

Do you have a holiday booked for this summer?
Have you been to Morocco before?
Where did you go to college?



2 Test yourself. Cover the sentences opposite and then complete these sentences.

- 1 Do you my asking where you are from?
- 2 What's about your region?
- 3 How have you worked here?
- 4 What did you do you came here?
- 5 you been there before?
- 6 How is this job different your last one?



3 You are in a taxi with a new colleague. Ask questions to keep the conversation going. Then listen to the model conversation.

You: *Ask about nationality.*

Colleague: I'm British. From Scotland, actually.

You: *Show interest. Ask what part.*

Colleague: I'm from Aberdeen. It's in the east of Scotland.

You: *Ask what is special about it.*

Colleague: Oh, it's the oil capital of Scotland. It's the centre of oil and gas drilling in the North Sea. I'm working there now.

You: *Show interest. Ask what your colleague did before this job.*

Colleague: Oh, before that I was at university in Edinburgh. I taught engineering.

You: *Ask how it was different.*

Colleague: Well, I was teaching students. Mainly Scottish. Now I'm working with oil and gas engineers from all over the world – especially from the US.

You: *Ask if your colleague has travelled a lot.*

Colleague: Yes, a lot. Too much really. I was in Mexico last week and Indonesia the week before. It's exhausting.

Business culture

Ice-breakers are topics that most people like to talk about. They may include sport, weather, families or general business. They are ways of 'breaking the ice' in a relationship.

However, it is also important to be sensitive to topics that different nationalities often prefer to avoid. We call these *ice-makers*. Discussing them makes the other person reluctant to talk to you. Unfortunately, topics that are *ice-breakers* in your country may be *ice-makers* in somebody else's! Look at the list of topics on page 105. Which ones are *ice-breakers* or *ice-makers* for you? Add notes to the table.