

Office small talk has a big impact on employees' wellbeing, study finds

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Small talk between colleagues—about the weekend, the weather or last night's TV—may seem unimportant but it has a big impact on our wellbeing at work.

In a study led by Rutgers and the University of Exeter Business School, researchers found exchanging pleasantries at work has an "uplifting yet distracting" effect on employees, with the positive findings outweighing the negative.

But when working from home due to the COVID-19 outbreak, the positives gained by face-to-face communication are hard to replicate.

Using data from 151 full-time employees across various industries, the study found small talk boosted employees' [positive emotions](#) and sense of wellbeing by the end of each working day, as well as making them more willing to 'go the extra mile' by helping colleagues and supporting their organisation.

But small talk can also disrupt employees' ability to focus on their work, which makes them less likely to go out of their way in their job because they have less time.

Small talk was defined as polite, light-hearted and superficial exchanges that are non-work related—greetings, farewells or superficial chat about how your day is going.

Employees were given three surveys every day for 15 consecutive working days.

They were asked how much small talk they made at work each day, as well as about their positive emotions (feelings of friendliness, pride and gratitude), how distracted they were, their wellbeing, and willingness to go 'above and beyond' the requirements of their job at the end of each day.

Employees who made more small talk than average felt more positive emotions, resulting in enhanced wellbeing.

These employees felt more recognised, more acknowledged and it gave them a sense of connection with people. And it made them more willing to go out of their way to help colleagues and attend voluntary events.

Small talk was also found to be distracting—creating interruptions and disruptions to work—but its overall impact on the workplace was positive.

Professor Jessica Methot, from the University of Exeter Business School and Rutgers University, said: "Small talk softens controversial conversations, enhances mood, creates positive group climates and facilitates a sense of belonging.

"Yet at the same time, many people consider small talk to be pointless, draining or distracting and therefore may self-impose isolation by arriving to meetings at the last minute to avoid talk about the previous night's [football game](#), or wearing headphones in the office to discourage pleasantries with co-workers.

"We demonstrate that engaging in small talk more than one normally would on average produces largely positive outcomes.

"This suggests people may 'mistakenly seek solitude' by avoiding small talk for the anticipated discomfort, possibly because they overestimate [negative consequences](#) and underestimate positive consequences."

People who can adapt their behaviour to fit their [social environment](#) felt the benefits of small talk more, with fewer distractions or negative effects, the study found.

These "high self-monitors" were adept at reading what was expected of them in conversation, and were better at launching and ending conversations without seeming inappropriate or rude.

In contrast, those who struggle to tailor their behaviour felt the negative effects of small talk more.

They were more likely to go "off script" by sharing too much information, responding to a rhetorical question or saying something inappropriate.

The research describes small talk as an important social lubricant—the light conversation before a meeting or that eases you into a serious negotiation or performance evaluation.

It's also a social ritual built into the day, which is why the study measured its impact on a day-to-day basis.

But with the COVID-19 pandemic making remote working the norm, the loss of this social ritual is profound.

"The value of small talk is in face-to-face communication and it's difficult to replicate that through remote settings," said Professor Methot.

"The idea of [small talk](#) is that it's spontaneous and that there's a shared interaction where we come into contact with each other and share that interaction face to face. It's really hard to replicate its value when you're not located in the same setting."

The study was published in the *Academy of Management Journal*.

More information: Jessica R. Methot et al. Office Chit-Chat as a Social Ritual: The Uplifting Yet Distracting Effects of Daily Small Talk at Work, *Academy of Management Journal* (2020). [DOI: 10.5465/amj.2018.1474](https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2018.1474)

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