Is small talk in the workplace really “trivial”?

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Small talk has generally been perceived as trivial and as not beneficial to workplaces in any way. However, it is observed that small talk does frequently occur in most workplaces among coworkers and even among subordinates and superiors. This gives rise to the suggestion that small talk is not totally trivial. Drawing on workplace scenes from the two movies ‘The devil wears Prada’ and ‘Working Girl’, this paper examines the distribution of small talk, its functions among coworkers, and its benefits for managers. This paper also adopts a community of practice (CofP) approach in examining how a newcomer of a workplace gets to become a member of the new CofP by learning to deal with small talk.

1. Introduction

Conversations about the weather, TV shows, people’s weekend activities or upcoming social gatherings are examples of small talk. This spoken discourse, which covers a wide range of topics, is defined as insignificant in most dictionaries. Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary and Collins Cobuild Advanced Learner’s English Dictionary, for instance, define ‘small talk’ as a polite conversation about ordinary or unimportant subjects that people make at social occasions. Schneider (1988) has checked the definitions of small talk in about thirty British and American dictionaries.
and found that small talk generally has connotations of trivial, unimportant, insignificant and the like. In a workplace, where people work towards a common goal in order to make profit for their company, there seems to be an irreconcilable conflict between the ‘trivial’ nature of small talk and the task-oriented nature of the workplace. Nevertheless, small talk does frequently occur in most workplaces. Does this mean that small talk is not as trivial as has been suggested? If so, what functions does small talk perform in the workplace? More specifically, would managers use small talk at all? And if they do, does it benefit their workplace environment in any way?

2. Literature review

2.1 Definition of small talk

Because of its negative perception as insignificant or peripheral, small talk has often been disvalued within popular culture (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003). In 1923, Malinowski introduced the concept of ‘phatic communion’, which ‘is both the earliest and the prototypical formulation of small talk as a communicative mode’ (Coupland, 2000: 2). He refers to small talk as ‘a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words’ (Malinowski, 1999: 297). And since then, more and more researchers have paid attention to the functions of small talk, thereby attempting to re-evaluate this mode of discourse.

As noted by Jaworski (2000), there are various names in which small talk has been referred to, such as phatic communion, casual conversation, chit-chat, gossip, minimal conversation, social talk, time-out talk etc. Though some authors may think certain terms are interchangeable, some may suggest they do not refer to the exact same concept. And even those researchers who use the same terminology may in fact talk about different things.

Since there is no consistency in the way in which these terms are used and interpreted in the literature, this paper will follow Holmes (2000) in using the term small talk, and will employ her continuum of small talk, as this model nicely illustrates the ‘shifting’ nature of workplace interactions.

Holmes (2000) regards small talk as non-work related talk. However, the boundaries between business talk and small talk are not rigid and clear-cut. She suggests a
continuum from one to the other (as illustrated in Figure 1), reinforcing the fact that ‘many workplace interactions do not neatly fit into the core categories of business talk and phatic communion’ (Holmes, 2000: 38).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Social</th>
<th>Phatic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business talk</td>
<td>related talk</td>
<td>talk</td>
<td>communion</td>
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Figure 1. Locating small talk on the continuum (Holmes, 2000: 38)

In Holmes’ (2000) continuum, talk in the workplace may gradually shift along the continuum from on-topic business talk to off-topic work related talk to small talk. And small talk ranges from social talk (which is more expansive personally oriented talk) to phatic communion (which is formulaic greeting and parting exchanges).

### 2.2 Functions of small talk

Small talk, a type of discourse traditionally perceived as non-serious, indeed serves as a multifunctional device in the workplace (Mullany, 2007). Its primary function is ‘doing collegiality’ as small talk focuses on solidarity and good team relationships. Malinowski (1999) suggests that phatic communion (small talk) accomplishes the social function of establishing and maintaining personal bonds with people in the same group. Small talk is said to have an oiling function which oils the social wheels (Holmes, 2000) helping to build collegiality and solidarity, which may eventually lead to sound and effective working relationships and a pleasant working atmosphere (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003). Hence, small talk is often regarded as a politeness strategy concerning positive face needs of both speakers and listeners (Laver, 1981). Holmes and Stubbe (2003: 97) believe that ‘paying attention to the face needs of others is a crucial component of “doing friendship”’ and building cordial relationships with coworkers.

Regarding face needs, small talk is an important strategy for subordinates when interacting with their superiors. When facing a difficult or conflictual situation, like requesting to leave work early, reporting an unachievable work goal or disagreeing,
small talk is a defusing action to express the information indirectly thereby protecting the participants’ face (Koester, 2006). Thus, small talk is seen as a mitigatory strategy (Laver, 1981) or a signal of relaxation (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003 & Schneider, 1988), especially if it occurs in the closing phase of interactions, small talk may provide relief from the intensity of the work talks and consolidate the participants’ relationship. As suggested by Tracy and Naughton (2000: 64), subordinates can also use small talk as a means to ‘get ahead’ in business by shaping a positive impression of themselves for their boss.

In addition, the gap-filling function of small talk can also be considered as a politeness strategy since it pays attention to the participants’ face needs. Silence occurring in conversations, as suggested by Schneider (1988), might be considered as embarrassing or threatening. If more silence is observed, the greater the psychological distance between the participants. Therefore, silence is often avoided in order to eliminate its potential hostility (Laver, 1981) and establish links of fellowship (Malinowski, 1999). And small talk is often used to fill the gap between work activities in order to avoid silence.

As Holmes and Stubbe (2003) have noted, it is very common that when team members wait for a meeting to begin, small talk is used to fill the time in order to avoid strange or unpleasant feelings. Furthermore, small talk which occurs in the initial phase of an interaction also serves an initiatory function and an exploratory function. On the one hand, it ‘allows participants to cooperate in getting the interaction comfortably under way’, and on the other hand, it ‘allows the participants to feel their way towards the working consensus of the interaction’ (Laver, 1981: 301).

Small talk also serves as a boundary marker having a transitive function which eases transitions between different phases of an interaction as suggested by Laver (1975) and Holmes and Stubbe (2003). Generally, participants shift back and forth between small talk and core business talk along Holmes’ continuum, and small talk can act as transition between two work-related phases. For example, small talk in the initial phase of interactions assists the transition to work talk (Holmes, 2000), while small talk in the final phase provides a means for finishing the interaction on a positive note (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003).
3. Analysis

The subsequent paper is organized in three analysis sections. The first section provides two examples to illustrate the distribution of small talk at work. The second section compares two examples for discussing the functions of small talk in the workplace. And the third section shows how managers may use small talk as a management strategy. Drawing on scenes taken from two movies called ‘The devil wears Prada’ and ‘Working Girl’, this paper adopts a community of practice (abbreviated as CofP) approach to evaluate the findings.

The CofP approach has developed within a social constructionist framework. It considers how people group together around a mutual engagement in an endeavor, such as ways of doing things, ways of talking, values and etc (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992). This approach is particularly useful to illustrate how a newcomer of a workplace learns to deal with small talk in order to become a member of the new CofP by being actively involved in interactions with other community members.

3.1 Distribution of small talk at work

Holmes and Stubbe (2003: 89) believe that small talk is more likely to predominate ‘at times and in places which are officially designated for non-work or social activities.’ But it is noted that small talk does not only occur in such places, instead it also occurs within official work time. Very often, small talk occurs at the boundaries of interaction, like when someone joins or leaves an interaction. It also occurs at the boundaries of the working day, for example when a coworker enters and leaves the workplace. Greeting and parting exchanges are the classic examples of small talk. Holmes and Stubbe (2003) suggest that reference to the weather, recent shared activities and ritual enquiries about well being are typical interactions in the initial phases. If greeting exchanges are absent in these phases, it would probably be because of the presence of urgent tasks.

Examples 1 and 2 are taken from the movie ‘The devil wears Prada’. In this movie, Miranda is the chief editor of a fashion magazine. She is a well-known personality in the company as well as in the fashion industry. She has a first assistant called Emily

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1 For a more detailed discussion of community of practice, please see Bernie Mak’s paper in volume one.
who has worked for her for a long time and thus knows her very well. While Andy, Miranda’s new assistant, does not know Miranda and the fashion industry well. The examples illustrate two scenes in which greeting exchanges between the superior and her subordinates are absent.

**Example 1**

**Context:** Miranda, the chief editor of a fashion magazine, enters the lift to get to her office in the morning. XX is a woman who works at the same company as Miranda. (Time in movie ‘The devil wears Prada’ 0:06:05: to 0:06:17)

[Lift’s door opens]

[A security guard opens the gate to allow Miranda’s entry]

[Miranda walks in the lift]

01. XX: Sorry, Miranda

[The woman leaves the lift immediately]

**Example 2**

**Context:** Miranda steps out of the lift. Emily, her first assistant, comes over to welcome her. (Time in movie ‘The devil wears Prada’ 0:06:18 to 0:07:47)

[Lift’s door opens]

01. Miranda: I don’t understand why it’s so difficult to confirm an appointment

02. Emily: I know I’m so sorry Miranda

03. I actually did /confirm last night\

04. Miranda: /Details\ of your incompetence do not interest me

05. Tell Simone I’m not going to approve that girl that she sent me

06. for the Brazilian layout

07. I asked for clean athletic smiling she sent me dirty tired and paunchy

08. And R.S.V.P Yes to the Michael Kors party

09. I want the driver to drop me off at 9:30 and pick me up at 9:45 sharp

……

[Miranda continues to gives directive orders]

[Other workers turn away from Miranda when they see her]

10. Miranda: Also I need to see all the things that Nigel has pulled for Gwyneth’s

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2 Although small talk is often associated with femininity, this gender issue will not be explored in this paper.
Is small talk in the workplace really “trivial”?

In the first encounter of the day, it is generally believed that there is a greeting, at least saying ‘hi’, between coworkers. However, as can be seen in example 2 (line 1), Miranda starts complaining to Emily once she leaves the lift without any greeting. It seems that the absence of greeting is due to the urgent work-related orders and Miranda’s annoyance. Nevertheless, if we go back to example 1, both the security guard and the unnamed woman see Miranda, but they do not have any greeting exchanges with her either. It thus seems that it is normal for Miranda not to exchange greetings with others. Moreover, in example 2, when the other employees see Miranda walking along the corridor, they turn around and stay away from her. And even Emily who is the one to welcome Miranda shows no intention to greet her. All these observations indicate that her subordinates know that it is Miranda’s style of having no greeting.

Being Miranda’s new assistant, Andy does not know Miranda well. She feels odd when she receives no response except for having a bag and a coat thrown on her desk after she says ‘hi’ to Miranda at her first few working days in the company (time in movie 0:18:50 – 0:19:03 and 0:25:38 – 0:26:35). These examples nicely illustrate that different people may have different preferences about making small talk. In order to become a member of a team at a company, one needs to know the preferences of the other members, for example Andy gets to know that her superior does not like engaging in small talk. These examples also show that it is not a must to have greeting exchanges in the workplace, even though the absence of greeting is rare and often unpopular.

Besides frequently occurring in the initial phase, small talk also occurs at the end of
interactions as mentioned above. It could be a 'brief [formulaic] utterance of see you later or give us a bell, or a more protracted [personal] disengagement' if time allows it (Holmes, 2000: 43). Since small talk is flexible, adaptable, compressible and expandable, the length, the occurrence, the topic, etc of small talk can alter according to different situations (Holmes, 2000). In the above two examples, it is seen that Miranda does also not engage in parting exchanges with others. This further suggests that it is Miranda’s style of not ‘doing’ small talk.

Laver (1981) suggests that interactions in the initial and final phases of encounters consist of linguistic routines which have the effect of acknowledging the identity and status of the listener. In the above examples, the absence of greeting and parting exchanges could be interpreted as a manifestation of the different status among the interlocutors: Miranda is in a higher position, she is the most powerful person in the company, as well as in the entire fashion industry. Emily, the security guard and the unnamed woman, three integrated member of this CofP, know that the absence of small talk is very typical for Miranda’s style, so they do not bother having greeting and parting exchanges or engaging in small talk with Miranda.

3.2 Functions of small talk in the workplace

In examples 3 and 4, two more scenes taken from the movie ‘The devil wears Prada’, are used to illustrate the various functions of small talk in a workplace context.

Example 3

Context: At the end of a day, Assistant Andy, who is a newcomer to the company and does not dress fashionably, is trying to chat with another assistant Emily. (Time in movie ‘The devil wears Prada’ 0:26:54 to 0:27:14)

01. Andy: [Sighs]
02. Thank God it's Friday right?
03. At least Miranda will be in Miami so we don't have to be on call this weekend
04. You know my dad's coming in from Ohio
05. Yeah we're gonna go out to dinner maybe see Chicago
06. You doing anything fun this weekend?
07. Emily: Yes
In example 3, there is a shift from work-related talk to social talk as there is a transition from Andy’s boss to her father. At the end of the day as well as the end of the week, Andy tries to make small talk in order to relieve the tension of work. This is enacted by her sigh in line 1 and her comment about Miranda in line 3. Besides relieving the tension, Andy is trying to build an interpersonal relationship with her colleague, Emily, by giving her personal information and asking Emily about her weekend. However, Andy just receives a minimal response of ‘yes’ and no information nor parting exchanges. This shows that Andy has failed in ‘doing collegiality’ with Emily. This may be due to the fact that Andy is a newcomer to this company who has only worked there for a few weeks. Thus she has not yet become a full member of this CofP, since her outfit, her ways of talking and the topic of her talk do not coincide with the established ways of behaving and talking in this CofP.

Example 4

_Context:_ Assistant Andy wears a beautiful and fashionable gown to the company’s annual party. ‘Paris’ refers to the upcoming fashion show Emily is going to go with her superior, Miranda, for business purpose. (Time in movie ‘The devil wears Prada’ 1:01:32 to 1:01:54)

01. Emily: Oh oh my God Andy you look so chic
02. Andy: Oh thanks Em you look so thin
03. Emily: Do I?
04. Andy: Yeah
05. Emily: Oh it's for Paris
06. I'm on this new diet
07. It's very effective
08. Well I don't eat anything and then when I feel like I'm about to faint
09. I eat a cube of cheese
10. Andy: Well it's definitely working
11. Emily: I know I'm just one stomach flu away from my goal weight

In example 4, there is a shift from small talk to off-topic work-related talk and then back to small talk: from the women’s appearance to the trip to Paris (a business trip with Miranda) and then back to Emily’s diet. After being praised by Emily, Andy compliments Emily on being thin. This time Andy chooses the right topic to chat with.
Emily. Emily is happy about the result of her new diet and continues to chat with Andy. Andy succeeds in ‘doing collegiality and friendship’ with Emily. This shows that Andy is becoming a member of the CofP, as this time her outfit and her topic are appropriate for this CofP.

Examples 3 and 4 support Laver’s (1981: 301) comment on small talk. He suggests that small talk can act ‘as an acknowledgement of the social relationship that exists between the participants’. In example 4, Andy and Emily successfully make small talk showing that they are members of the same CofP. This has to be attributed to Andy who has learned appropriate ways of interacting with other members at her workplace, which is further reflected in her changed ways of dressing, the choice of topic and her appropriate contribution to the interaction including small talk.

Even though small talk has a lot of functions, it is not always appropriate as the examples above have shown. Small talk in the workplace tends to be affected by different factors, such as the relative status of participants, how well the participants know each other, how busy they are, as well as the specific norms of the CofPs (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003). Therefore, small talk needs to be analyzed together with a range of contextual factors.

### 3.3 Small Talk as Management Strategy

Since profit-making is the goal for task-oriented workplaces, managers could be expected to use different strategies to maximize the profit for their company. And since small talk is often negatively perceived as dispensable and irrelevant as discussed above, it is likely that superiors would have little interest in engaging in small talk with their subordinates (Levine, 1987 qtd. in Holmes and Stubbe, 2003). Thus small talk does not seem to constitute a strategy of which managers would typically use.

However, Tracy and Naughton (2000) argue that anyone who fails to engage in small talk is considered as having a problem since small talk is crucial to the institutional success at any level. And as suggested by Holmes and Stubbe (2003), people are unavoidably involved in establishing interpersonal relationship with each other in every social encounter. According to the results of a questionnaire conducted by an American research study on small talk in two business organizations (Levine, 1987 qtd. in Holmes and Stubbe, 2003), employers preferred to limit talk to non-personal
topics and showed little interest in developing small talk with their subordinates. But these results were not consistent with Holmes’ and Stubbe’s (2003) data which were recorded in a wide range of workplaces. In Holmes and Stubbe’s (2003) data, the superiors often took the lead to have small talk, and they were also willing to engage in small talk initiated by others.

Example 5 is a scene taken from the movie ‘Working Girl’. In this movie, Katherine is the department manager of a bank. Tess is assigned as Katherine’s new secretary. This example exemplifies how a superior uses small talk to establish a collegial relationship with her subordinate.

Example 5

Context: After Katharine, the manager, enters the company in the morning, she comes over to welcome Tess, a new secretary, on Tess’ first day in the new company. (Time in movie ‘Working Girl’ 0:13:38 to 0:14:23)

01. Katharine: Hi I'm Katharine Parker you must be + Tess
02. Tess: Hi
[They smile and shake hands]
03. Katharine: Oh great bunny?
[Katharine picks up the bunny, a doll, from Tess’s desk.]
04. Tess: Um I don't usually have a bunny on my desk (…)
05. Katharine: It was my birthday a few days ago
06. Katharine: No kidding? Mine's next Tuesday How old?
07. Tess: Thirty
08. Katharine: Really? Well I'll be thirty next Tuesday
09. Katharine: We're practically twins
10. Tess: [laughs] Except I'm older
11. Katharine: Just barely
12. Tess: I I've never worked for somebody who was younger than me
13. Tess: before
[Both laugh]
15. Katharine: Well, there's a first time for everything ++
16. Katharine: It's not going to be a problem is it?
17. Tess: No no
18. Katharine: Good
19. Why don't you pour us a couple of coffees and come on inside
[Katharine turns around and starts walking back to her own office.]
20. Katharine: I'm LIGHT no sugar.

The primary function of small talk is ‘doing collegiality’. With good collegiality, the
team relationship could be strengthened and the working atmosphere could be more
pleasant. These functions are consistent with the relational goals that a good leader
aims at achieving. Here in example 5, the superior, Katharine, initiates social talk with
her new subordinate, Tess, after the greeting exchanges (line 3). Making small talk,
the superior reduces the asymmetry in the hierarchy and the social distance between
her subordinate, in order to enhance their collegial relationship, and perhaps to give a
good impression to the new staff member. This may help Katherine to gain her
subordinate’s compliance and goodwill which would further increase their
productivities for the company (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003). And this function of
increasing productivity thus coincides with the transactional goals of a good leader.

However, Tess is a new staff in this CofP who does not know Katherine well. As a
consequence, she interacts passively with Katharine, which is reflected by her delayed
response (line 4), her hesitation (line 12) and her minimal responses (lines 2, 7 and
17). This may be due to the fact that Tess meets her boss for the first time and they
have not yet established a close relationship. This factor affecting the development of
small talk echoes the previous discussion of the importance of contextual factors.
However, in spite of Tess’ sparse reactions, Katharine continues to control this
conversation. This illustrates the point that management of small talk is an indirect
and covert way of ‘doing power’ (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003). Eventually, Katharine
gradually enacts her power overtly by shifting from the small talk to a directive in
lines 19 and 20 when reaching the closing phase of the interaction.

The role of small talk in the workplace should not be underestimated by superiors.
Engaging in small talk is indeed a good management strategy for superiors in at least
two ways. On the one hand, engaging in small talk can help superiors to achieve their
relational goals. On the other hand, rapport which results from small talk might
further their transactional goals (Coupland, 2000) of maximizing the profit for the
company. So, as long as there is no urgency of on-going tasks, it appears useful to
make small talk in terms of relational and transactional goals. Due to the effectiveness
of small talk, many books are available on the techniques of making small talk in the
workplace.
4. Conclusion

Small talk, traditionally perceived as trivial, has attracted many researchers to study it. According to Holmes (2000), small talk is non-work related talk ranging from social talk to phatic communion situated at the opposite ends of core business talk in her continuum.

As the examples have shown, small talk serves a range of functions. With the aim to establish sound and effective relationships and create a pleasant atmosphere in the workplace, the primary function of small talk in the workplace is ‘doing collegiality’ among workers. Moreover, using small talk is also a good management strategy for superiors because it allows them to achieve their relational goals by reinforcing interpersonal relationships with their subordinates, while it also enables them to achieve their transactional goals by increasing the productivity of their company. Accordingly, the intrinsic multifunctional nature of small talk offers a range of advantages to any workplace. And this is probably the reason why small talk is frequently observed in workplace environments in different occasions among different interlocutors.

However, examples 3 and 4 have also illustrated that different communities of practice have their own distinctive features of workplace interactions, including the use of small talk. Learning how to appropriately engage in small talk is one of the things newcomers of a workplace need to learn in order to become integrated members. Therefore it is important for newcomers to observe the preferences of using small talk by different members in the new workplace. Once a newcomer actively participates in and is being actively involved in small talk, he/she is becoming an integrated member of the CoP.

In conclusion, small talk is far from being trivial in task-oriented workplaces in terms of its functions. Instead it is an important means of creating and maintaining interpersonal relationships through ‘doing collegiality’. Thus, the value of small talk should not be disparaged.
Appendix

Transcription conventions

XX   Unidentified speaker
YES  Capitals indicate emphatic stress
[laughs]  Transcriber’s description
+    Pause of up to one second
…./......  Simultaneous speech
?    Rising or question intonation
… …  Section of transcript omitted
( … )  Indecipherable speech

References


