Chatting at Work: The Power of a Simple Social Conversation

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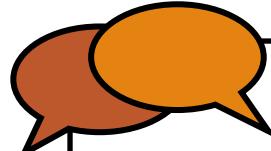
What are social conversations at work?[1]

1. Involve **other members** of the organisation
2. Take place during **work time**
3. About **non-work topics** (i.e. not about your job, work tasks, or organisation)
4. **Typically done face-to-face**, but can be done via **technology** (e.g. telephone, instant messenger, email)

They go by many names in the academic literature and everyday language[3, 4]

| Small talk | Chit chat | Chatting | Social talk |
| Gossip | Chin-wag | Nattering | Chatter |

at work

Private or informal interactions/ conversations/ communication

Water-cooler conversations

Non-work communication
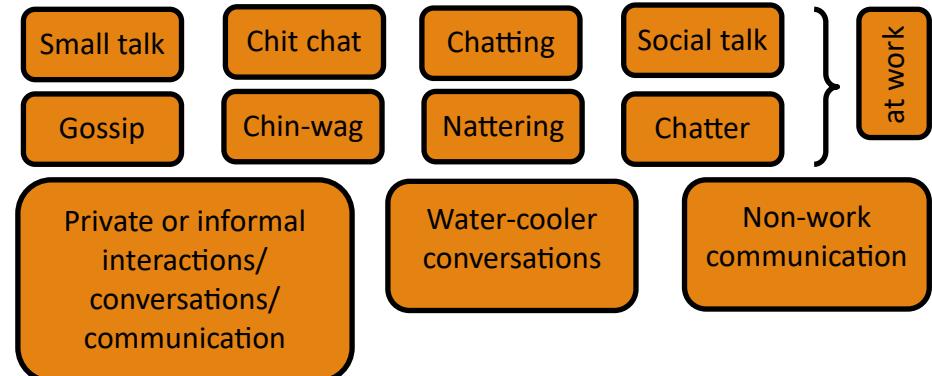
What does past research tell us about social conversations at work?

In a systematic review of the literature, Dietmann et al (2019)[3] found that 'chatting' is associated with important aspects of working life.

Small talk used to help **business negotiations** progress (Yang, 2012)

Employees use informal interactions at work **to get and give help** and create a sense of **belonging** at work (Fay, 2011)

Small talk **maintains relationships** and is the 'social glue' in organisations (Holmes, 2003; Holmes and Fillary, 2000)

Private-interactions are seen as more **personally meaningful** and **less superficial** than task-related interactions (Tschen et al, 2004)

Small talk before a meeting made the **meeting more productive**, even more than using 'good meeting procedures' (Allen et al, 2014)

Long conversations about non-work topics make people **feel more supported** at work (Kirmeyer and Lin, 1987)

◊ **Social relationships at work are formed and maintained through work & non-work conversation**

◊ **Most** modern workplaces have opportunities & demands for social conversations

◊ As you chat more over time you share more in a process called reciprocal self-disclosure, thus deepening trust in each other

NEW RESEARCH: Investigating the impact of social conversations at work on high-quality working relationships, team performance, loneliness, and acceptability of the conversations[1, 2]

Method overview

◊ 125 employees in a large organisation completed a questionnaire

◊ 69 employees took part in an intervention using a bespoke interactive toolkit to increase their number of social conversations at work (intervention group)

◊ 56 employees took part in a control activity that did not involve taking part in social conversations at work (control group)
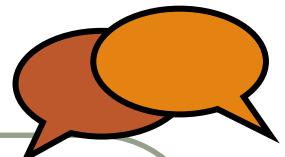
About their social conversations at work

- Seen as being 'very important'

- Happen throughout the day/ at any time

- Occur 2 – 5 times a day; people talk more about work

- Equally likely to be started by the participant or their colleague

- Typically involve peers in the team and least likely to involve a supervisor

- Most often about jokes; followed by personal/ family activities, hobbies, and food

The outcomes of their social conversations at work

- Both intervention and control group showed significant improvements **over the two weeks** in **high quality working relationships**, **team performance**, and **acceptance** of social conversations, but mean increase was generally higher for the intervention group

- Slight decrease in average **loneliness** score for intervention group and slight increase for control group, but changes were not statistically significant over time, i.e. it's hard to shift loneliness

Take home messages

1. Simple/ non-emotive topics are common. Power of social conversation at work doesn't lie in deep self-disclosure

2. Social conversations at work are normal; can't eliminate them and shouldn't try. They are the 'social glue' of an organisation

3. Simple interventions created for this research can help people develop their social conversations skills; trainable

4. Tentative evidence that chatting at work can improve quality of working relationships, team performance, and acceptance of chatting

5. Loneliness at work is more pernicious; managers should be alert to the signs

To cite this research:

1. Dietmann, A., Lewis, R., Yarker, J., & Zernerova, L. (2020). Carry on chatting: Do social conversations improve workplace relationships, performance, & reduce loneliness? Division of Occupational Psychology Annual Conference, January 2020, Stratford-upon-Avon. UK: British Psychological Society.

2. Dietmann, A., Lewis, R., Yarker, J., & Zernerova, L. (in preparation). The impact of social conversations at work on workplace relationships, team performance, loneliness, and acceptance of social conversations: A field intervention study.

3. Dietmann, A., Lewis, R., & Yarker, J. (2019). Social conversations at work: a systematic literature review. Division of Occupational Psychology Annual Conference, January 2019, Chester. UK: British Psychological Society.

4. Dietmann, A., Yarker, J., & Lewis, R. (in preparation). The benefits and barriers of social conversations at work: A systematic literature review.