

# Business: Small Talk



## Warm up

- Do you enjoy engaging in small talk in business settings? Why or why not?
- When is small talk useful or important?
- In your country, how is small talk perceived? Is it considered important or trivial?
- Have you ever experienced a cultural misunderstanding during small talk in a business setting? What happened?
- Do you have any tips for for small talk?



## 1. What topics should you discuss and avoid in small talk?

- Small talk in a business setting

| Okay topics | <i>Not</i> okay topics |
|-------------|------------------------|
|             |                        |

- Small talk in a private setting

| Okay topics | <i>Not</i> okay topics |
|-------------|------------------------|
|             |                        |



## 2. Read the text and answer the questions below.

### The Importance of Small Talk in Cross-Cultural Business Communication

Small talk, the informal conversation that precedes or accompanies a business meeting, is often seen as a trivial and time-wasting activity. However, small talk can be a powerful tool for building relationships and establishing trust in business settings, particularly across different cultures where cultural differences can pose communication barriers.

Small talk serves several important purposes in business settings. First, it helps to break the ice and put people at ease, especially in the initial stages of a business relationship. By engaging in small talk, individuals can establish rapport and build a sense of familiarity, which can pave the way for more substantive conversations later on. Small talk can also serve as a way to gather information about the other person's interests, hobbies, and background. This information can be useful for finding common ground and building a connection.

However, small talk is not always easy or straightforward, particularly in cross-cultural contexts where different cultural norms and values can lead to misunderstandings or awkward moments. For example, in some cultures, personal topics such as family and religion are considered taboo or too private to discuss in business settings. However, in others, such topics are seen as essential for establishing trust and building relationships.



Let's take the example of Germany and Brazil. In Germany, business conversations are typically direct and to the point, with a focus on facts and data. Small talk is not as critical, and Germans may perceive too much small talk as superficial or insincere. On the other hand, in Brazil, small talk is an essential part of business communication. Brazilians place a high value on personal relationships, and small talk is seen as a way to build trust and establish a connection with the other person. In fact, Brazilians may consider it rude to jump straight into business without engaging in some small talk first.

These cultural differences can lead to miscommunications or misunderstandings in business settings. For example, a German businessperson may be taken aback if a Brazilian counterpart spends too much time on small talk, while a Brazilian may be put off if a German jumps straight into business without engaging in any small talk. These cultural differences require individuals to be aware of and sensitive to cultural nuances, as well as to adapt their communication style accordingly.

1. Why is small talk important in business settings?
2. How can small talk be useful for building relationships?
3. Why can small talk be challenging in cross-cultural contexts?
4. What is an example of a cultural difference in the importance of small talk between Germany and Brazil?
5. How can cultural differences in small talk lead to miscommunications or misunderstandings in business settings?
6. What skills do individuals need to successfully engage in small talk in cross-cultural contexts?



**3. Read the definitions below and find the word from the text that matches.**

1. Of little importance or significance (P1) .....
2. A close and harmonious relationship between two people (P2)  
.....
3. Meaningful or considerable (P2) .....
4. Prohibited or restricted by social custom (P3) .....
5. Existing or occurring at or on the surface only; shallow (P4)  
.....
6. Failure to communicate adequately or clearly (P5) .....
7. Subtle differences or distinctions in expression, meaning, or response (P5)  
.....

## Quiz: Small Talk Around the World

1. In which country is small talk often seen as essential for building relationships and establishing trust?

A) *Germany*    B) *Brazil*    C) *Sweden*

2. In which country is it important to show respect and avoid confrontation during small talk?

A) *Japan*    B) *Brazil*    C) *Italy*

3. Which countries don't really like small talk because they do not like to converse to fill time.

A) *Norway, Sweden, and Finland*    B) *Vietnam, China, and South Korea*

4. In which country is direct and explicit communication valued, and small talk may be brief and focused on business matters?

A) *India*    B) *Germany*    C) *Spain*

5. In which country is personal relationships and trust important in business settings, and small talk may focus on common interests or topics related to business?

A) *Germany*    B) *China*    C) *The United States*

6. In which country is it considered impolite to jump straight into business without engaging in some small talk first?

A) *Brazil*    B) *Japan*    C) *Germany*



4. Watch the video [How Sweden survives without small talk](#) and answer the following questions.

1. What do Swedish think is the purpose of talking?
2. What is the meaning of small talk that Swedish people don't get according to Alli Edwardson ?
3. Why do some experts think that Swedish people are so reserved?
4. Can you describe the peach and the coconut cultures?

## Useful phrases: Small Talk

| <i>Industry News/Developments:</i>   | <i>Networking</i>  |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have you heard about the latest trends in (industry)?</li> <li>• I've been following [industry news source] and there have been some interesting developments lately.</li> <li>• What do you think about (recent event in the industry)?</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It's great to see/meet you here today. Have you been to this event before?</li> <li>• What brings you to this event? Are you looking to connect with anyone specific?</li> <li>• Have you had any success with networking at events like this?</li> </ul> |

| <i>Business Goals and Plans</i>  | <i>Work Life Balance</i>   |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are your company's goals for the upcoming quarter/year?</li> <li>• Have you made any plans for expanding your business?</li> <li>• What new initiatives are you working on to grow your business?</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you manage to balance your work and personal life?</li> <li>• Do you have any tips for staying productive while also taking care of yourself?</li> <li>• What do you like to do outside of work to relax?</li> </ul> |

| <i>Personal Interests</i>   | <i>Current Events</i>   |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I noticed you have a (hobby/interest). How did you get into that?</li> <li>• What do you like to do in your free time?</li> <li>• Have you travelled anywhere interesting lately?</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did you catch the news about (recent event)? What are your thoughts on it?</li> <li>• I heard (trending topic) has been a big talking point recently. What's your take on it?</li> <li>• What are some current events or issues that you think are worth following right now?</li> </ul> |



## 5. Role-play: Work in pairs or groups.

- Choose one of the roles below. Each student should have a different role.
- Read the information about the event and try to network by engaging in small talk.

The finance industry networking event is a two-day conference that brings together professionals from various sectors of finance. The event features keynote speakers, and panel discussions covering topics such as digital transformation.

Between presentations the conference offers plenty of opportunities for informal networking. Attendees come from all over the world, making it a great opportunity to meet people from different cultures and backgrounds. Overall, the conference provides a platform for professionals to exchange ideas, learn from each other, and make valuable connections in the finance industry.

| <i>Maria Garcia</i>   | <i>John O'Donnell</i>  |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Nationality:</i> Spanish</li><li>• <i>Occupation:</i> Investment Banker</li><li>• <i>Transportation:</i> Train</li><li>• <i>Journey:</i> Good. She enjoyed the scenery and had a chance to catch up on some work.</li><li>• <i>Reason for attending:</i> To learn about the latest trends in finance and make connections with other professionals in the industry.</li><li>• <i>Hobbies:</i> Yoga and hiking.</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Nationality:</i> Irish</li><li>• <i>Occupation:</i> Financial Analyst</li><li>• <i>Transportation:</i> Car</li><li>• <i>Journey:</i> Bad. He got stuck in traffic and arrived late for the conference.</li><li>• <i>Reason for attending:</i> To meet potential clients and learn about new investment opportunities.</li><li>• <i>Hobbies:</i> Playing guitar and watching basketball.</li></ul> |

| <i>Ahmed Khan</i>   | <i>Sophie Martin</i>  |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Nationality:</i> Indian</li><li>• <i>Occupation:</i> Wealth Manager</li><li>• <i>Transportation:</i> Plane</li><li>• <i>Journey:</i> Good. He had a smooth flight and enjoyed the food.</li><li>• <i>Reason for attending:</i> To network with other professionals in the industry and share his knowledge about finance.</li><li>• <i>Hobbies:</i> Traveling and reading.</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Nationality:</i> Canadian</li><li>• <i>Occupation:</i> Accountant</li><li>• <i>Transportation:</i> Train</li><li>• <i>Journey:</i> Bad. She had to stand for most of the journey because the train was overcrowded.</li><li>• <i>Reason for attending:</i> To expand her knowledge of financial regulations and compliance.</li><li>• <i>Hobbies:</i> Painting and playing tennis.</li></ul> |

| <i>Carlos Rodriguez</i>   | <i>Karen Lee</i>   |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Nationality:</i> Argentinian</li> <li>• <i>Occupation:</i> Hedge Fund Manager</li> <li>• <i>Transportation:</i> Car</li> <li>• <i>Journey:</i> Good. He had a pleasant drive and arrived at the conference with plenty of time to spare.</li> <li>• <i>Reason for attending:</i> To explore new investment strategies and meet potential investors.</li> <li>• <i>Hobbies:</i> Playing soccer and cooking.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Nationality:</i> Australian</li> <li>• <i>Occupation:</i> Financial Advisor</li> <li>• <i>Transportation:</i> Plane</li> <li>• <i>Journey:</i> Bad. Her flight was delayed, and she missed her connecting flight, which made her arrive late and feeling frazzled.</li> <li>• <i>Reason for attending:</i> To learn about new investment products and services and make connections with other professionals in the industry.</li> <li>• <i>Hobbies:</i> Dancing and gardening.</li> </ul> |

| <i>Pierre Dubois</i>  | <i>Emma Johnson</i>  |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Nationality:</i> Belgian</li> <li>• <i>Occupation:</i> Investment Analyst</li> <li>• <i>Transportation:</i> Train</li> <li>• <i>Journey:</i> Good. He enjoyed the ride and had a chance to read some industry reports.</li> <li>• <i>Reason for attending:</i> To meet potential clients and learn about new investment trends.</li> <li>• <i>Hobbies:</i> Playing piano and skiing.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Nationality:</i> English</li> <li>• <i>Occupation:</i> Fund Manager</li> <li>• <i>Transportation:</i> Plane</li> <li>• <i>Journey:</i> Good. She had a smooth flight and enjoyed chatting with the person sitting next to her.</li> <li>• <i>Reason for attending:</i> To network with other professionals in the industry and share her expertise in sustainable finance.</li> <li>• <i>Hobbies:</i> Photography and hiking.</li> </ul> |



## 6. Read the text and answer the following questions.

### Cross-Cultural Communication: Navigating Small Talk in Business Meetings Between Sweden and the United States

John is a sales executive from the United States who has travelled to Stockholm to meet with Erik, the CEO of a Swedish manufacturing company. John hopes to persuade Erik to sign a contract with his company for the supply of raw materials. During the initial meeting, John tries to engage in small talk to establish a rapport with Erik, but their conversation doesn't seem to be going well.



The conversation:

John: "So, Erik, I'm really excited to be here in Stockholm. This is my first time in Sweden, and I must say, your city is beautiful!"

Erik: "Yes, it is a gorgeous city, but it's not the most important thing about Stockholm."

John: "Right, of course. Well, I hope we can find some common ground to work together. What do you like to do in your free time?"

Erik: "I like to spend time with my family and friends, just like most people."

John: "Sure, family is important to me too. Do you have any hobbies or interests?"

Erik: "I enjoy reading and traveling, but I don't see how that's relevant to our meeting."

John: "Oh, sorry about that. I just wanted to get to know you better. So, about the contract, I think our company can offer you a competitive advantage in terms of quality and price. What do you think?"

Erik: "I appreciate your offer, but we need to discuss the details further before making any decisions."

The issue:

In this scenario, John is trying to establish a personal connection with Erik through small talk, but Erik doesn't seem to be interested. John may interpret Erik's responses as being unfriendly or uncooperative, but in reality, Erik is just following Swedish cultural norms for business communication. In Sweden, direct communication is preferred, and small talk is often seen as superficial and unnecessary. Additionally, Swedes tend to value privacy and may be uncomfortable discussing personal topics with strangers.

### Comprehension Questions:

1. Who is John and what is his purpose for traveling to Stockholm?
2. Who is Erik and how does he respond to John's attempts at small talk?
3. How do cultural differences between Sweden and the United States impact their communication? What might John interpret Erik's responses to mean, and what is the actual reason for Erik's behaviour?
4. In what ways could John adapt his communication style to better align with Swedish cultural norms?
5. How might Erik's communication style be perceived in the United States, and how could he adjust his behaviour to be more effective in an American business context?