An Introvert’s Guide to Small Talk at Work

By Helen Aw, Career Advisor Intern

“It’s OK to cross the street to avoid making small talk.” If you’ve read Susan Cain’s “Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking” then you might recognize this as number 7 of 10 on her Manifesto for Introverts. If you identify as an introvert like I do, you might at one time have done that very thing. I know I have!

Why do introverts not favor small talk? The name itself gives us a clue: small talk is informal conversation about seemingly trivial matters that are not emotionally charged. Small talk avoids anything deep and personal because it is intended to be light-hearted, peppy, fast, and casual. For many introverts this might feel like a waste of time and energy—even disingenuous—as they often prefer big talk or thought-provoking, chin-stroking, head-tilting conversations.

Introverts typically do not talk for the sake of talking; they prefer to talk when they have something substantial to say, after they’ve silently processed their thoughts. Idle chatter unfortunately does not accommodate this. Once an introvert has formulated a thought and is ready to translate it into speech, a new topic may have been introduced into conversation and the introvert is forced to jettison their line of thinking in order to keep up. All that brain activity seems to have been for naught, thereby overwhelming and draining the deep thinker.

Small Talk Opens Doors

However, small talk does have its benefits, especially in the workplace. First, it can help build rapport between colleagues and foster group cohesion. Feeling like a team member can positively affect one’s attitude at work and possibly reduce absenteeism. Second, it can be the warm-up to the big talk that introverts seek and a gateway to having a confidant at work. How helpful would it be to have a trusted colleague in whom one might share career goals or vent to when work becomes stressful? Third, small talk conditions the mind to think quickly and improves mental function as one tries to keep the conversation flowing. The mental gymnastics required in social banter can aid in enhancing work productivity and efficiency.

Small talk is a valuable, transferrable social skill that can be a catalyst for numerous opportunities. For instance, are you looking to expand your contact list? Use small talk to network. Looking to make a successful business transaction? Use small talk to make a connection. Looking for career upward mobility? Use small talk to position yourself as a contender for a promotion.

Network for Job Search Success

Easy Resources to Start Networking Now

By: Mariann Devlin, English MA ’15

A job-searching student will often spend hours-upon-hours browsing job-search websites without ever finding a position that is right for them. Career experts estimate that unadvertised jobs make up anywhere from 70 to 80 percent of all open positions—with employers often hiring candidates who have been referred to them through networking. Networking is a crucial part of the job search process.

You may wonder how you can develop relationships with individuals or companies while you’re still in school. Fortunately, DePaul University’s Career Center offers programs to help students learn to network and make connections.

Connect with Alumni Mentors

Alumni Sharing Knowledge (ASK) is a mentoring program which connects students with alumni who have found success in their chosen field. You can search the ASK mentor database for volunteer mentors who can provide career guidance during and after college.

“The good thing about ASK is that these are individuals who have actually volunteered,” says program director Gina Sian. “They raise their hand and say, ‘I would love to talk to a student.’”

Organic networking is another benefit of ASK. When networking, you are less likely to receive a referral if you immediately insist on being connected to a company's recruiters. However, if you take the time to develop a solid and trusting relationship with a mentor, a referral may come naturally or unexpectedly.

“Networking is really an investment in relationship; it’s an investment in people,” Sian explains.
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The Art to Successful Small Talk
To master small talk, it might be helpful to think in terms of how to approach people. Find common ground with a verifiable fact (e.g., “The work party is next week.”) then build on it by asking questions (e.g., “Will you be going?”) and sharing something relevant (e.g., “I like that it’s at the same restaurant as last year.”). Other starter topics could include the weather, current events, pop culture, family/friends, and hobbies/interests. In doing this, be sure there is an equal mix of speaking and listening; think of it as a game of tennis where you want to continuously hit the ball back and forth by asking open-ended questions.

Don’t forget to pay attention to your nonverbal gestures. Are you smiling? Are you making eye contact? Are you listening? Are you mirroring the other person? Are you nodding? All these help build instant rapport.

Finally, practice. Practice what you might say or ask then make it a point in your workday to interact with a co-worker for at least two minutes. Keep trying. As you develop the skill, it will eventually feel less disingenuous and cumbersome. Here are a couple examples of conversation starters and responses to get you started:

Starter: “The weekend went by so quickly; do anything exciting?”
Response: “I stayed in on Saturday then visited my sister on Sunday.”
Starter: “Looks like the temperatures this week will be in the 70s.”
Response: “I’ve been looking forward to finally storing away my winter coat.”

Find a Balance
Perhaps one of the most important things to keep in mind when mingling with co-workers is to recognize and honor your own limitations. Set a socializing quota and carve out alone time to quiet your mind. Remember, the goal is not to become a social butterfly or fight your preference for deep and meaningful conversation; rather it’s to be amenable and improve the ability to make polite conversation. It’s OK if you still have the urge to cross the street to avoid small talk, as long as you’re making an effort to balance that urge with an occasional conversation-starting “Hello!”.

Sharpen Career Knowledge & Skills

Workshop Series
Improve your career readiness through more than twenty different workshops.

Career Advising
Walk in and see a Peer Career Advisor or make an appointment to see a Career Advisor who specializes in your major.

Gain Internship & Work Experience

University Internship Program
Get valuable work experience while you fulfill your Liberal Studies Experiential Learning requirement through this internship program.

Student Employment
Earn a wage and gain career-relevant experience through on-campus jobs, internships, or temporary project work through Student Temporary Services.

Build Your Network

Alumni Sharing Knowledge (ASK)
Connect with DePaul Alumni volunteers who are working in your field of interest through this mentoring and networking program.

Career Networking Events
Meet and learn from working professionals in your field of interest at these events, held throughout the academic year.

Company Presentations
Make contacts and learn about company cultures at organizations that recruit at DePaul.

Find Work

On-Campus Interviewing
Apply with top companies online and interview right here on campus.

Job & Internship Fairs
Connect with hundreds of hiring employers at multiple fairs throughout the academic year.

Job & Internship Listings
Search thousands of open positions online in DePaulExperience.

Online Resume Books
Make your resume available through online employers can find you when seeking candidates who match specific criteria.

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“Just like anything, the more you know each other the stronger the recommendation.”

Meet Potential Employers at Job & Internship Fairs
Another easy way to network is through DePaul’s Job and Internship Fairs. Alma Mendez-Ceballos, career advisor for the College of Business, says that networking at career fairs is a “natural” way to get your foot in the door. “Recruiters have traveled to and planned to be at the career fair to talk with DePaul students,” Ceballos said. “Even if you currently hold a job or an internship, networking at a career fair is a great place to start looking for your next opportunity.” If you’re not currently in the job market, be up front about it at the fair. Touching base with a potential employer now can help you down the road when you are ready to search for a new position.

Prepare and Follow-Up
Prior to meeting with an ASK mentor or attending a career fair, do the proper research in advance so you’re prepared to make informed conversation and ask questions about the position and company.

“It doesn’t always have to be extensive company research, but having a solid idea of what the company does is a plus that can differentiate you from other applicants,” Ceballos advises. At a job fair, make sure you review the employer profiles in the program. You can learn about an ASK volunteer’s background through their online profile, so you spend less time on introductory questions and more time on topics like shared career interests or company culture.

It’s also important to keep in touch. The success of the ASK program usually depends on how often a student wishes to meet with their mentor.
Workshops

30 in 30: Perfecting Your Pitch
One of the most important elements in networking and building your personal brand is your elevator pitch. Get ready for upcoming job fairs and networking opportunities. Join us for a 50-minute workshop to perfect your 30-second pitch. Learn the components in developing a strong and effective pitch and have an opportunity to practice.

Wednesday, July 16
5:15 – 5:45pm DPC 9500

Ace Your First Professional Interview
Preparing for interviews can give you the confidence you need to highlight your strengths. This workshop teaches you how to prepare for the interviewing and post-interview follow-up process. You will be introduced to the various types of interviews, including behavioral interviewing.

Monday, June 30
12:00 – 1:30pm DPC 9500

Wednesday, August 6
5:00 – 6:00pm Teleconference

Connecting Your Values to Career Satisfaction
Your work values play a very important role in determining what kind of work you find fulfilling. Through this workshop, you’ll assess and prioritize your most important work values, and discover how to use what you’ve learned about your work values to help guide your career decisions.

Thursday, July 31
11:30am – 1:00pm SAC 151

Handling Job Offers
Determine the best techniques and practices to negotiate your compensation package. This workshop will include a discussion on salary, benefits negotiation, and offer advice on how to handle salary requests and multiple offers.

Monday, August 4
12:00 – 1:30pm DPC 9500

How Can Alumni Help Me Plan My Career?
Faced with many decisions, most college students and alumni feel uncertain about their career choices at some point. Talking to someone who’s been there can help. In this workshop, learn the different ways our alumni can help you as you plan your career. We’ll talk about where to find alumni and the best practices of building relationships and growing your networking. It’s easier than you think!

Tuesday, June 24
4:00 – 5:30pm DPC 9500

Friday, July 18
12:00 – 1:30pm Webinar

Friday, August 22
12:00 – 1:30pm Webinar

How to Build a Career Portfolio
A professional career portfolio provides you with a tremendous resource for showcasing your work skills and experiences to an employer. In this workshop, you’ll learn how to conceptualize and compile an effective portfolio.

Thursday, July 24
2:30 – 4:00pm DPC 9500

Identify Your Skills and Accomplishments
Skills are the currency of the job market; you get a paycheck in exchange for the skills you use in your job. Through this workshop, you’ll assess your skills, determine which ones you want to acquire or further develop, and identify ways to do so. Also, you’ll learn how to clearly articulate your skill set and provide solid examples of those skills in practice.

Tuesday, July 29
1:30 – 3:00pm DPC 9500

Job Search Strategies in a Challenging Job Market
Learn how to identify effective job search strategies in a challenging job market. Get an overview of a multitude of job search tactics and begin the process of selecting the strategies that make the most sense for you. Learn how to maximize the numerous job search resources available at DePaul and beyond.

Tuesday, August 12
12:00 – 1:30pm SAC 151

Love What You Do – DePaul Interest Finder (DIF)
This workshop is ideal for students who are exploring major and career options. Research has shown a strong correlation between exploring major and career options. Research shows that students who participate in this workshop are more likely to make an informed decision.

Thursday, July 22
10:00 – 11:30am SAC 151

Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)
Looking for work that is intrinsically interesting and gratifying to you? The MBTI is used to assist individuals in identifying their personality strengths, preferred work environments, communication styles and career possibilities. While few occupations provide a “perfect” match between personality and work tasks, this indicator and workshop will assist you in making an informed decision.

Tuesday, July 8
2:00 – 4:00pm SAC 151

Program Orientations

University Internship Program (UIP) Orientation
This is a prerequisite workshop for UIP and must be completed in order to enroll in an academic internship course to earn Experiential Learning credit. Students who have not yet secured an internship are welcome to attend this workshop.

The UIP Orientation provides you with the information you need to complete the enrollment process, and register for a University Internship Program course. In this workshop, you will learn the format and content of the UIP 250, 251, 252, 253, 254, 350 and 367 courses, as well as how completing an internship can help you explore career paths, gain valuable experience and connect with professionals in your area of interest.

Note: For UIP Workshops, you will receive instructions via email the day before the scheduled webinar. An Internet connection and the ability to hear audio is required to participate.

Thursday, July 10
10:00 – 11:00am Webinar

Tuesday, July 15
12:00 – 1:00pm Webinar

Wednesday, July 23
2:00 – 3:00pm Webinar

Thursday, August 7
3:00 – 4:00pm Webinar

Monday, August 11
11:00am – 12:00pm Webinar

Friday, August 15
10:00 – 11:00am Webinar

Tuesday, August 19
12:00 – 1:00pm Webinar

Thursday, August 21
3:00 – 4:00pm Webinar

Wednesday, August 27
4:00 – 5:00pm Webinar

Wednesday, September 3
10:00 – 11:00am Webinar

Monday, September 8
9:30 – 10:30am Webinar

Friday, September 12
12:00 – 1:00pm Webinar

Monday, September 15
12:00 – 1:00pm Webinar

Please visit careerconnect.depaul.edu to view the calendar and register for workshops.

Workshop Location Key
DPC = DePaul Center, 1 East Jackson, Loop Campus
SAC = Schmitt Academic Center, 2320 N. Kenmore Avenue, Lincoln Park Campus
Webinar: Check careerconnect.depaul.edu for details.
Financial Fitness Workshops

Demystifying Student Loans
Attend this workshop to gain a deeper understanding of your student loans. You will learn about the different types of student loans, how to estimate your debt load upon graduation, and what some of your repayment options may be.

Thursday, July 31
4:00 – 5:00pm  SAC 151

How’s Your Credit History?
Do you know how your credit habits will affect your lifestyle? Learn important information about choosing credit cards, understanding credit reports and credit scores and managing existing credit card debt.

Tuesday, July 1
4:00 – 5:00pm  DPC 9500

Wednesday, July 23
12:00 – 1:00pm  SAC 151

Savings Plans that Won’t Fail
We all want to save, but sticking to savings plan can be challenging. This workshop will provide you with some strategies for saving. Learn how to set reasonable and attainable goals that will help motivate you to keep your savings on track. Once you have goals in place both savings and budgeting become easier.

Tuesday, July 15
12:00 – 1:00pm  DPC 9500

The Graduate’s Guide to Financial Success
This workshop will provide graduating students with simple strategies to become financially successful. Topics covered include repayment of school loans, how to create a realistic budget for a full-time job and credit strategies.

Thursday, July 17
12:00 – 1:00pm  DPC 9500

Thursday, August 7
3:00 – 4:00pm  SAC 151

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Easy Resources to Start Networking Now  continued from page 2

“How you want to keep the door open,” Sian says of first-time meetings. According to Sian, you can do this by asking questions, like “May I stay in touch with you?” or “Can I connect with you on LinkedIn?”

Students who have just spoken to a recruiter at a career fair should exchange business cards as well. “Make sure to write a note within 24 hours of the interaction,” Ceballos also suggests. “Mention something of interest from your conversation and say thank you.” Follow-up emails can also include a request to connect on LinkedIn.

Above all, be confident and enthusiastic when networking. “Don’t underestimate yourself,” Ceballos says. “Don’t think you are only a student who has nothing to offer. Remember you are an emerging professional and networking is part of your career development.”

“You can put your best foot forward by focusing on how excited you are about your craft,” Sian says of networking in general. “If you let that shine, everything will come naturally.”

For more information about ASK, visit ask.depaul.edu.

Looking for your next job or internship?
Save the date for the two-day Fall Job & Internship Fair, October 9 & 10, 2014.