

17

Office gossip

Learning objectives

This unit uses the topic of office gossip and small talk at work to practise reported speech. Students also look at the wider implications of office gossip and discuss whether it is harmful or productive. A text about an attempt to ban gossiping at work leads to a roleplay in which a management consultant tries to persuade a client to abandon a strict policy aimed at discouraging gossip at the coffee machine.

The grammatical focus is on reported speech and the lexical focus is on relationships at work.


Digital resources: Unit 17

Online Workbook; Extension worksheets; Glossary; Phrase bank; Student's Book answer key; Student's Book listening script; Fast-track map

In this first section, students listen to and discuss some office gossip. They then examine the language used and explore how we report speech and how we use *say* and *tell*. They do further work on question words and tenses in reported speech and then complete conversations and report them.

Warm-up

Focus attention on the quotation at the top of the page. Ask whether the writer thinks gossip (informal chit-chat, often about other people) is a good thing or a bad thing (good; she thinks companies should encourage it by providing communal areas where employees can talk). Then brainstorm the sorts of things people gossip about at the office and make a list on the board. Encourage students to say when and where they think most gossip in the office is exchanged (at the coffee machine, in the canteen, in the toilets, etc) and whether they think it is important for employees to have communal areas where they can share information and build up personal relationships.


1  **2.29** Make sure students have read the questions before you play the recording so that they know what information to listen out for. Ask students to speculate on what the conversation will be about. Then play the recording and check answers. Play the recording a second time if necessary. You could make the final question a class discussion.

ANSWERS

- She has been away on holiday.
- The company is planning to restructure.
- Their boss
- They have heard that some people will lose their jobs in the restructuring.
- They think she may be having an affair with Gary and that because of her 'special relationship' with him, her job will be safe.
- Students' own answers

2.29

- A: Hi Quin. How's it going?
B: Trixy! Where have you been?
A: I had a few days' holiday owing to me.
B: Go anywhere interesting?
A: I wish! No, I went up north to stay with my parents.
B: So, you haven't heard the news.
A: What news?
B: About the 'restructuring'.
A: What restructuring?
B: They want to reorganize marketing and sales.
A: No! Really? Is it official?
B: No, but somebody overheard Gary talking to one of the management consultants.
A: What did he say?
B: Apparently he said that we were overstaffed in some areas.
A: Never!
B: Yes, this consultant told him they would have to let some people go.
A: But that's awful.
B: Yes, Gary asked him how many people it involved.
A: And what did he say?
B: He said it depended on individual performance and attitude.
A: Does that include Maureen?
B: What do you mean?
A: Well, you know what they say about her and Gary.
B: Go on ...
A: I'm not saying who, but someone told me he often sees them in the Café Au Lait.
B: That little café on Oxford Road?
A: That's right.
B: Well I never! The other day he asked her if she would stay behind to work on a report.
A: There you are, then. There's no smoke without fire.
B: Listen, don't tell anyone I told you.
A: Now, come on, Quin, you know me better than that.
B: Back to work, then.
A: Right. Catch you later.
B: Bye.

2  **2.29** Go through the example sentence with the class. Elicit what has happened in the change from direct speech to reported speech (the tense of the verb has shifted back from Present Simple to Past Simple, and the pronoun has changed from *you* to *we*). Establish that the first sentence in each pair (a–e) is what the person actually said, and the second sentence is the reported speech. With stronger students, ask them to try to complete the reported speech before they listen to the recording again. Students listen again and complete the reported speech sentences. When you have checked answers, ask students to identify and underline the parts of the sentences which

changed when they were reported. You may need to point out that in sentence d), the verb *sees* has not shifted back a tense. This is because it is describing something that is still happening on a regular basis: he often sees them together in the café. The speaker wants to emphasize the continuing nature of this fact and so chooses the Present Simple rather than the Past Simple.

ANSWERS

- a told him they would
- b asked him how many people
- c said it depended
- d told me he often sees
- e asked her if she would

Language links

Direct students to the *Language links* section on pages 109–110, for more information on direct and reported speech and how words change from one form to the other. There is also a further transformation exercise to practise reporting what people have said.

3 Ask students to work with a partner to decide which sentence needs *said* and which needs *told*. Check answers with the class and elicit the difference between the two verbs (*say* doesn't take an indirect object; *tell* does – *he told me, we told them*, etc). Ask students to produce one or two example sentences of their own using *say* and *tell*.

ANSWERS

- a said b told
- Say doesn't take an indirect object, but *tell* does.

Language links

There is a further exercise to practise the use of *say* and *tell* in the *Language links* section on page 110.

4 Complete the three sentences on the board with the class. Elicit that we only use *if* when we report *yes/no* questions. Ask students for one or two more examples of their own. You could divide the class into two teams and have them take turns to say a question for the other team to report. Each team gets a point for every correctly reported question. To make this more challenging, ensure that the questions are a mixture of questions with question words and *yes/no* questions. You may want to point out to students that it is also possible to use *whether* instead of *if*, but only do this if they can use *if* correctly.


ANSWERS

- a where b when c if (/ whether)
- We use *if* in *yes/no* questions.

5 Remind students of the tense shift they saw in 2 and ask them to complete the two sentences. Then check the answers with the class and elicit answers to the questions below the sentences.

ANSWERS

- a was b would start
- The Present Simple becomes the Past Simple.
Will becomes *would*.

6  **2.30–2.33** Emphasize that students can complete the four conversations with any words that make sense in the context. Allow them to compare their answers with a partner. Then play the recording for them to listen and compare their version with the recording.

ANSWERS

- | | |
|---------------------|---------------|
| a have you finished | b sorry |
| c excuse | d speak to |
| e straight away | f a minute |
| g discuss | h computer |
| i key | j ready |
| k okay | l look at |
| m busy | n you know |
| o quiet | p work |
| q suppose | r See you |
| s How are | t pleased |
| u head | v Sixty grand |
| w company car | x drinks |

 **2.30**

Conversation 1

- A: Jeff, have you finished last month's production figures?
- B: No, Jane, I'm sorry. Can I give them to you this afternoon?
- A: It's no good being sorry. There's always some excuse. If they're not on my desk by four o'clock, I'll have to speak to Mr Bradley.
- B: Yes, Jane. I'll start straight away.

 **2.31**

Conversation 2

- C: David, have you got a minute? There's something I want to discuss with you ... in my office.
- D: What's it about?
- C: Oh, well, we're missing a laptop computer from the store.
- D: What has that got to do with me?
- C: Well, you are the only other person with a key to the store and ...

 **2.32**

Conversation 3

- E: Marie, the figures you need are ready.
- F: Thanks, Pedro. Is everything okay?
- E: Yes, no problems. Would you like to look at them with me?
- F: Yes, but I'm a bit busy this afternoon.
- E: Me too. Er, do you know that new café they've just opened? It's nice and quiet. We can go through them there after work.
- F: Oh, I suppose so, but I won't be able to stay for long.
- E: Great. See you there at about six, then?
- F: Yes, all right. See you there.

2.33

Conversation 4

G: Hi, Monica.
 H: Oh, hello, Jim. How are things going?
 G: Great. In fact, you can be the first to congratulate me.
 H: Yes, you look very pleased with yourself. What's up?
 G: I'm the new head of the eastern sales team.
 H: Oh, really? What salary are you on now, then?
 G: Sixty grand a year.
 H: I can't believe it. Sixty thousand!
 G: And they're giving me a new company car.
 H: Oh really? Congratulations, then. The drinks are on you. See you later.
 G: Yes. Bye.

7 Students work with a partner and take turns to report the conversations they heard in 6. As students practise their conversations, go around offering help and encouragement, and make a note of any particularly good conversations which can be performed for the class.

Language links

Direct students to the *Language links* section on page 109, for more vocabulary on relationships at work. There is also a crossword puzzle on the same topic.

Time to talk

In this section, students begin by reading a newspaper article about a new law against gossiping introduced by a Brazilian city council. They discuss the law and look at some of the vocabulary used in the article. They then discuss the subject of gossip, and talk about policies in their own companies. Next, they read a selection of website comments on the subject of gossip, and complete sentences to give their own point of view. Then they listen to a radio interview about gossip and discuss statements about it. Finally, they do a roleplay in which a management consultant tries to persuade a client to relax a strict policy banning gossip at work.

1 Give students a few minutes to read the article and discuss it with a partner. Students answer the questions. Have a class vote on whether the ban on gossiping is a good idea or a bad one. Would students like to introduce a ban on gossiping in their English classes?

ANSWERS

- a The new law says that anyone who spreads gossip or rumours about work colleagues can be sacked.
- b Students' own answers

2 Students scan the article quickly to find and underline the matching words and phrases. Check answers with the class, then ask students to use the new words in sentences of their own.

ANSWERS

- a banned from
- b spread rumours/gossip
- c face the sack

3 Put students in small groups. Appoint a secretary in each one to take notes of the discussion and report back to the class.

ANSWERS

Students' own answers

4 Go through the table headings with the class before they read the comments. Then ask them to read the comments and classify them according to the headings (make sure they understand that *mixed feelings* means you aren't sure whether gossip is always good or always bad). Allow students to compare their notes with a partner before you check answers with the class. Elicit which, if any, of the comments they agree with.

SUGGESTED ANSWERS

Gossip is good: A, D, H
 Mixed feelings: B, E, G
 Gossip is bad: C, F

5 Ensure that students understand that they should complete the sentences with their own ideas, not the words that were used in the text in 4. Ask them to compare their completed sentences with a partner or small groups. Have a class feedback session to compare opinions.

ANSWERS


Students' own answers

6 Students work individually to match the words and the definitions, then compare their answers with a partner. When checking answers with the class, you could ask students to use each expression in a sentence.

ANSWERS

a 3 b 5 c 6 d 4 e 1 f 2

7 Read the statements with the class. You could ask students to raise their hands if they agree with each statement. Alternatively, have everyone stand up, read out the statements one by one, and ask students who agree with each one to remain standing and those who disagree to sit down. Make a note of the majority view on each one.

8  **2.34** Play the recording. Ask students to make a note about whether the speaker agrees with their own opinions in 7 or not. Have a class feedback session to compare results.

 **2.34**

- A: In this week's *Business Today*, we talk to Karina Schmidt. Karina is the author of a report by the Industrial Society which looks at workplace relations, and how they've changed over the years. Karina, first of all, welcome to the programme.
- B: Thank you, it's a pleasure to be here.
- A: In your report, you say that many companies nowadays have abandoned some useful institutions which allowed for social interaction.

- B: Yes, these days there's less opportunity to gossip and socialize. For example, often the tea trolley has been scrapped, and having a chat in the tea break was an important part of the working day. Going for a drink after work is another example.
- A: And why do you think these things have disappeared?
- B: I think it's all part of the revolution in human resources. Some of these traditions have become unfashionable. Talking about things not connected to work is now seen as bad and as wasting time. There are even theories about removing chairs from meeting rooms, so that the meetings are more efficient and finish quickly.
- A: And are we more efficient now, then?
- B: Well, that's a good question, but in any case, something has been lost from the workplace which is very important. And perhaps in the long term, with these drives for efficiency, companies are making false economies.
- A: In what way?
- B: The difference between a good job and a bad job are the human, emotional elements. In other words, happy employees are productive employees. People enjoy the social aspects of work, the personal interaction with colleagues, the friendships ...
- A: And the gossip!
- B: And the gossip. Yes, in some ways gossip is the glue that holds the organization together. Providing communal space such as coffee areas or lunch rooms allows employees to share information and build relationships that benefit both the company and the employees.
- A: Are you saying that gossip should be encouraged?
- B: Not exactly, it's obviously a question of balance. All gossip and chatting doesn't make for an efficient company, but neither does no gossip or chat. All I'm saying is that I think companies would do well to remember this when trying to improve efficiency and bring down costs.
- A: Karina, I'm afraid that's all we've got time for. Thank you very much for talking to us. It's been very interesting.
- B: Thank you for inviting me.
- A: That's all for now from *Business Today*. So, until next week, goodbye.

9 Students work with a partner to do the roleplay. Give them plenty of time to prepare what they are going to say, but discourage them from writing out a script. When they do their roleplays, go around offering help and encouragement. At the end, find out how many of the managers were convinced by the consultant's arguments and persuaded to change their policy.

10 The memo is easiest to complete if, in the roleplay in 9, the personnel manager believed the policy should be changed. However, you could give students the option of backing the policy in spite of the evidence from the Industrial Society's report.

Language links

ANSWERS

Vocabulary

Relationships at work

- 1 a coffee machine b management consultant
c meeting room d company policy e human resources
- 2 1 workplace 2 drive 3 gossip 4 effort
5 spread 6 news 7 smoke 8 office
9 approve 10 drink 11 share 12 trolley

Grammar

Practice 1

- a were
b had spent
c would
d was
e had worked
f could
g were
h would

Practice 2

- a She says she's really enjoying her job at the moment.
b I said (that) it was too late to cancel the meeting.
c He told me (that) they were having a lot of problems with the production department that day.
d He asked what time Mr Keegan was going to arrive.
e He keeps telling me (that) we should buy a new computer system.
f She asked if/whether Mr Merchant was available.
g She said (that) the fixed costs included the office rent and equipment hire.
h They asked me where I worked now.
i She said (that) she would meet me at the airport at eight o'clock.
j He told me (that) he wanted to see me about the arrangements for the following day.
k He asked me if/whether the office opened on Saturdays.
l She asked when the documents would be ready.
m He keeps saying (that) he's the best salesman in the company.
n He asked if/whether he could make a phone call.
o He asked me what I thought of the new website.

Practice 3

- a tell b say c say d says e told f ask
g say h ask i tell; say