

Down the Rabbit Hole and Back: Towards Casual Conversation Theory

Mollie Hartup
Kent State University

Abstract

Casual conversation in the workplace fosters free exchange of ideas and knowledge creation and may contribute to employee feelings of engagement and satisfaction. A positive working environment may also lead to employee retention. Casual conversation's role in the learning process is also explored. Through a series of proposition statements and the related 360 Degree Model of Ideal Workplace Conversation, Casual Conversation Theory aims to articulate the nature of the communication and knowledge flows that occur during informal interactions.

Introduction

Members of today's traditional workforce spend roughly half their waking hours at work (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). During those extended hours, various types of conversations among co-workers will occur—some more directly work-related and others more personal or social, or a hybrid of the two. Human connections have the potential to offer cognitive benefits, such as a boost to executive functioning, and therefore have the potential to improve work performance (Ybarra, Winkielman, Yeh, Burnstein, & Kavanagh, 2010). It can be difficult to classify conversations as purely work-related or personal, since discussions may cover both professional and social topics during an interaction. Bakker (2011) and Rawlins (2009) have argued that organizations should facilitate the free exchange of ideas and information at work. Individuals possess the majority of a company's overall knowledge, mostly in the form of tacit knowledge, or knowledge that is hidden within an individual and cannot be easily articulated (Smith, 2001; Nonaka, 2008). Given the difficulty in extracting valuable knowledge resources from the individual, organizations may wish to take steps to actively retain employees. Losing workers leads to decreased institutional knowledge and increased financial costs. In 2016, the average cost per new hire in the United States was \$4,425 (2017 Talent Acquisition Benchmarking Report). However, keeping employees satisfied may require more than competitive monetary compensation. A lack of several elements, such as motivation, appreciation, rewards, recognition, security, advancement, and communication between employees and managers can also lead to attrition (Thaly & Sinha, 2013).

Organizations may benefit from strategies that make employees feel valued and engaged, since engagement has been shown to increase employee productivity (Shepherd, 2018). Empowering workers to talk to each other, though a simple strategy, may be a critical component to ensuring employee satisfaction and retention. The occurrence of casual conversation, in a workplace or between colleagues outside of the workplace, will also lead to increased exchange of tacit knowledge, which is likely to benefit the organization. This paper explores the notion of casual conversation, its potential benefits in the workplace, and factors which may empower or inhibit its occurrence.

Literature Review

Casual Conversation Defined

Scholars have been studying informal interpersonal interactions for the last century (Malinowski, 1923; Laver, 1975; Eggins & Slade, 1997). Though the author of this paper refers to these interactions as casual conversation, prior research uses terms such as phatic communion and small talk to refer to the same concept.

Phatic communion is a term first created in an essay by British anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski to refer to brief, casual exchanges that do not seek or offer information (Malinowski, 1923). According to Malinowski, it is meaningless communication used during the exchange of social pleasantries that “fulfill a certain function, and that is their principal aim, but they are neither the result of intellectual reflection, nor do they necessarily arouse reflection in the listener” (Malinowski, 1923, p. 315).

Laver revisits this notion half a century later by exploring the potential benefits of engaging in phatic communion (Laver, 1975). He posits that phatic communion is not a simple phenomenon, as previous scholars had suggested, but rather a process that creates connections through "subtle and intricate means whose complexity does not deserve to be minimized by the use of phrases as 'a mere exchange of words'" (Laver, 1975, p. 216). Laver's research, which focuses on conversational openings and closings, describes phatic communion as "a complex part of a ritual, highly skilled mosaic of communicative behavior whose function is to facilitate the management of interpersonal relationships" (Laver, 1975, p. 236). He further asserts that while phatic exchanges are not conducted for the express purpose of fact-finding or seeking, information is often exchanged during these interactions (Laver, 1975).

A more recent study in a healthcare setting also finds value to phatic communion. Researchers conducted qualitative interviews with 40 people between the ages of 64 and 90 about experiences in healthcare, using seemingly phatic questions, such as "How are you?" (Coupland, Coupland, & Robinson, 1992). Though the responses themselves did not result in emergent themes, there were observable differences in the way the participants transitioned from phatic openings with different extents of hedging towards full disclosure of health-related concerns (Coupland et al, 1992). Most of those interviewed discussed their health experiences "while still to an extent respecting the potentially ritualized nature of the initial question they were asked" (Coupland et al, 1992, p. 227). Researchers believe these findings show promise for phatic communion to serve as a bridge between relational and interactional communication (Coupland et al, 1992). Furthermore, it suggests practitioners may benefit from incorporating sociolinguistic skills into their medical practice by asking simple, open-ended questions such as, "How have you been lately?" Fisher's comparative discourse analysis of doctor-patient and nurse practitioner-patient dyads illustrates the depth and breadth of dialogue that can result from asking open-ended non-medical questions (1991). Discoveries about a patient's life made during the conversation can help inform a medical diagnosis (Fisher, 1991).

Other scholars move away from the notion of phatic communion and aim to construct definitions for what they refer to as casual conversation. Ventola constructs a detailed structure for what defines a wide range of casual conversations, by establishing variables of subject-matter, situation-type, participant roles, mode, and medium of discourse (Ventola, 1979). She identified several key phases of the casual conversation as greeting, approach, centre, and leavetaking and classified conversations as minimal or nonminimal based on the social distance between parties (Ventola, 1979). According to

Ventola, a minimal structure serves to establish or maintain contact between individuals, and non-minimal structures offer greater potential outcomes (Ventola 1979). For example, a conversation that consists only of an exchange of pleasantries may be considered minimal in Ventola's view; whereas a conversation that extends beyond the greeting phase and delves into another question or topic for more than a brief moment may be considered nonminimal. Eggins & Slade also use the term casual conversation to refer to informal interactions, including talk "for the sake of talking itself," that is not motivated by a clear pragmatic purpose (Eggins & Slade, 1997, p. 6). They acknowledge casual conversation's role in the construction of interpersonal relations and social identities (Eggins & Slade, 1997). They argue that the ability to speak freely with another person is what makes the exchange so powerful—"The paradox lies in the fact that casual conversation is the type of talk in which we feel most relaxed, most spontaneous and most ourselves, and yet casual conversation is a critical site for the social construction of reality" (Eggins & Slade, 1997, p. 16). Through that free exchange of ideas emerges what the authors consider the hallmark of successful casual conversations—a tension between "establishing solidarity through the confirmation of similarities, and, on the other hand, asserting autonomy through the exploration of differences" (Eggins & Slade, 1997, p. 22).

Structurally, Eggins & Slade (1997) classify conversational phases into chat segments (very short bursts) and chunk segments (longer segments in which a single speaker dominates the conversation). They further refer to chat as a conversational construct that is managed locally and chunk as a construct that fits into a global or macro-structure. Researchers have more recently begun to examine conversational structure as a first step towards developing a model for artificial machine-based dialogue (Gilmartin, Vogel, Saam, Campbell, & Wade, 2018b). In the 2018 study of six hour-long informal conversations, findings show that chat was most common during the first 8-10 minutes of conversations (Gilmartin et al, 2018b). As conversation continues, chunks emerged more frequently and became the dominant modicum of conversation. "It can be seen that there is a greater tendency for the conversation to go directly from chunk to chunk the longer the conversation continues" (Gilmartin et al, 2018b, 57). There was no significant gender difference between chunk duration distributions, and overlap was found to be more common during chat phases than chunk phases (Gilmartin et al, 2018). A team of researchers with some overlap with the Gilmartin group has also explored conversations among three or more speakers for the purposes of enhancing natural dialogue between human and machine conversational partners (Gilmartin, Cowan, Vogen, & Campbell, 2008a). The authors suggest future research could explore ways to model casual talk as a series of mini dialogues that could apply to different corpora (Gilmartin et al, 2018b).

Casual Conversation in the Workplace

The workplace is one such setting, where various conversational corpora exist. The work of Eggins & Slade considers casual talk at work and explores typical topics discussed and their frequency (Eggins & Slade, 1997). Through the study of three hours of coffee break conversation at three different workplaces, the authors categorize the genres discussed during the longer chunk sections of discourse and explore differences between male and female coworkers. Across the three groups, storytelling was most prevalent at 43.4% followed by observation/comment (19.75%), opinion (16.8%), gossip (13.8), and joke-telling (6.3) (Eggins & Slade, 1997). The most frequently occurring talk type in the male cohort was teasing or friendly ridicule, and gossip did not occur in this group; whereas gossip and storytelling were most common among women, and teasing did not occur (Eggins & Slade, 1997).

Other researchers examine both the structure and potential benefits of casual conversation in the workplace (Coupland, 2000; Koester, 2006; Mavraki and Akoumianakis, 2014). Koester refers to

workplace discourse as relational talk and divides it into five main categories—non-transactional conversations, which include office gossip and small talk; phatic communion, which includes small talk at the beginning or end of transactional conversations; relational episodes, which include small talk or office gossip occurring during a transactional task; relational sequences and turns, which include non-obligatory task-related talk with a relational focus; and interpersonal markers, which include the use of vague language during transactional talk (Koester, 2006). Content covered during non-transactional talk includes everyday topics such as the weekend, holidays, family and friends, personal experiences, food, weather and current events; and Koester finds that close co-workers engage in more frequent small talk, which can be a "catalyst for a turning point in the work-related discussion" (Koester, 2006, p. 143). Despite having developed a classification system for workplace discourse, Koester acknowledges a gray area and asserts the importance of non-transactional talk in the process of completing workplace tasks—"The interplay between transactional and relational goals can be multi-layered and complex" (Koester, 2006, p. 144). Several workplace dimensions are described as benefiting from relational sequences (Koester, 2006, p. 157):

- Contributing to a positive working relationship by showing affiliation and solidarity
- Demonstrating why the task is important, and thereby validating its performance
- Performing a discursive action (e.g. an account) indirectly and thus avoiding or defusing awkward or conflictual identities
- Negotiating institutional and discursive identities. (For example, through conversation a subordinate may take the lead in trying to solve a problem, thus constructing a dominant discursive identity.)

Individuals interviewed in the study also had an awareness of the existence of small talk and saw its benefit in the organization—"All the interviewees felt that small talk did have a function and was not just trivial, from very general remarks that it 'humanizes the enterprise' to more sophisticated ideas about the role it performed in relation to their work" (Koester, 2006, p. 159). One speaker remarked that solutions to problems sometimes emerged during small talk (Koester, 2006). Freed and Ehrlich also found support for the interplay between what they call ordinary talk and institution talk (2010). They further find that just as institutional talk is not confined to the institution or organization, ordinary talk takes place within the organization (Freed & Ehrlich, 2010). Similarly, Coupland acknowledges the "blurring of traditional lifeworlds — e.g. 'the world of work' vs. 'the world of leisure' becoming less distinct in an information society" (Coupland, 2000). She also points to the importance of small talk in a commercial setting through a discussion of a British Telecom booklet titled *Talk Works: How to Get More out of Life through Better Conversations* (1997). The excerpt chosen by Coupland aims to show the importance of casual conversation between an apparent customer and worker in the service industry—"It may be just Gail's way of saying 'I like you. I value your company.'" To dismiss this kind of conversation - small talk, as we call it - as unimportant is to deny Gail the opportunity to demonstrate her friendship" (as cited in Coupland, 2000). Others concur that it is difficult to draw a solid line between business talk and small talk in an organization and that "there is a continuum from one to the other, with many different kinds of 'off-topic' discourse functioning in interesting ways in between" (Holmes, 2000, p. 56). Holmes also raises the issue of workplace power relationships affecting the existence of small talk, describing the typical situation where supervisors determine the extent to which small talk can take place (Holmes, 2000).

Just as formal and informal communication both occur in organizations, workplace learning also occurs both formally and informally in a dynamic fashion, where formal learning stimulates informal learning, and vice versa (Leslie, Airing, & Brand, 1997). Studies suggest that as much as 70% of workplace learning

may be informal, and it occurs most often when employees are motivated to learn (Leslie et al, 1997). Informal learning can be self-directed, better retained than formal learning, and may lead to better employee performance (Leslie et al, 1997). Informal learning can happen naturally at unplanned times and locations, especially when casual conversation takes place and allows for tacit knowledge exchange (LeClus, 2011). Other studies suggest informal learning in professional settings may lead to increased problem-finding and –solving, interpersonal connectivity, and increased knowledge sharing and creation (Wilson & Hartung, 2015). An example from my own professional experience in higher education may serve to illustrate this process. A colleague involved in a casual conversation with another university professional caught a brief mention of a new travel policy. Not receiving direct communication about the new policy but recognizing its importance, my colleague asked questions to learn more about how the policy might affect her area. The result of the casual conversation involving my colleague was new knowledge that spurred immediate additional steps that were taken to ensure compliance with the previously unknown policy. More broadly, this situation also exposed a larger concern about a systemic breakdown of critical information flows.

Casual Conversation and Knowledge Transfer

Knowledge Management theories offer formalized approaches to analyzing and describing the way the two major types of knowledge, explicit and tacit, move from person to person that can occur during casual conversation. Explicit knowledge is sometimes also referred to as tangible knowledge, and tacit knowledge is less concrete and harder to articulate, as it is generally retained in the minds of the knowers (Dalkir, 2017). The four basic patterns for knowledge transfer in an organization are tacit to tacit, explicit to explicit, tacit to explicit, and explicit to tacit (Nonaka, 2008). In his foundational piece, Polanyi describes tacit knowledge as a "mechanism which can produce discoveries by steps we cannot specify," that is essential to all understanding, even seemingly explicit matters (Polanyi, 1966). Although nearly 90 percent of knowledge in any organization may be classified as tacit knowledge, such knowledge is often undervalued and underutilized in organizations that lack supportive environments based on trust and openness (Smith, 2001). Face-to-face contacts, such as casual conversations, are the mechanism in which up to two-thirds of work-related information is gradually transformed into tacit knowledge (Smith, 2001). Sometimes, the solution is as simple as letting people communicate freely.

“Creating expensive hardware and software to share knowledge works only when people talk to one another regularly at work, network, serve on task forces or attend conferences and knowledge fairs. An organization is what it knows” (Smith, 2001, p. 320).

Other scholars argue that extracted knowledge cannot be recreated outside the individual. Through a case study of a small company in England, Devane and Wilson explore the notion that employees are better served managing the complexities of their own knowledge (2009). Rather than try to artificially extract or reassemble employee knowledge, the company studied created a culture where knowledge was needed to prosper, and employees were encouraged to seek out the knowledge they needed (Devane & Wilson, 2009). Under this less structured, performance-based approach, knowledge became a necessary and tangible product (Devane & Wilson, 2009). Rather than creating traditional knowledge management systems in organizations, Devane and Wilson suggest viewing knowledge as "something that is inextricable from the individuals within the business, and that the best way to 'manage it' (that is, get the best use out of it) is to allow the individual to manage it themselves" (2009, p. 38). Though the authors seem to support the idea of free sharing of information, they also suggest the person best suited to use knowledge is the original possessor. This approach also respects unique employee cultures, which may inform an individual's knowledge orientation (Devane & Wilson, 2009).

Organizational Communication Perspective

By incorporating analysis of both theory and practice, the subdiscipline of organizational communication provides an additional lens through which to view casual conversation in the workplace. Groups of various sizes serve as the primary site for many organizational accomplishments, and group members fulfill two common and mutually dependent roles—task roles and maintenance roles (Benne & Sheats, 1948). Task roles often include individual activities, such as idea formation or information seeking, that are concerned with job accomplishment. Maintenance roles, which include providing support or encouraging others, focus on maintaining interpersonal relationships with an organization. Kreps states that task and maintenance roles are well integrated in effective organizations (1990). "To accomplish the organizational tasks that are enhanced by task roles, organization members must be able to work cooperatively, which is enhanced by maintenance roles" (Kreps, 1990, p. 171).

Communication in an organization is closely linked with the organizational climate, or the internal emotional tone of the organization. Kreps describes the relationship between organizational climate and communication as circular. "Friendly communication climates encourage organization members to communicate in an open, relaxed, and convivial manner with fellow members, while negative climates discourage open and friendly communication" (Kreps, 1990, p. 194). Gibb's communication climate model describes an organization's communication climate as a continuum from supportive to defensive (1961). Strong supportive climates have also been linked to enhanced organizational effectiveness (Kreps, 1990). Other researchers have connected organizational climate with job satisfaction and performance (Pritchard & Karasick, 1973). Through a study of 76 managers from two organizations with divergent values (high achievement orientation and expansion oriented vs. low achievement orientation and less dynamic), Pritchard and Karasick found strong evidence that job satisfaction relates positively to several dimensions of climate—"perceptions of the supportiveness and friendliness of the climate, how effectively it deals with its operating and competitive problems, how well the climate rewards its employees, and the degree of democratization achieved in the organization" (Pritchard & Karasick, 1973, p. 142).

Organizational communication consists of both formal and informal communication. The focus here is on informal communication, since the informal mode of communication more closely aligns with the notion of casual conversation. In organizations, informal communication is sometimes referred to as the grapevine, which has been regarded as "evil," a "safety valve," or a "very mixed blessing" (Davis, 1953). Though the term grapevine sometimes has a negative connotation, it has potential to be highly useful and powerful for organization members to quickly disseminate information that may affect their job or that they simply want to know in a timely fashion (Davis, 1953). In his landmark study, Davis further suggests that management should not only acknowledge the existence of this informal channel of communication but also encourage and cultivate it (1953). "No administrator in his right mind would ever try to abolish the management grapevine. It is as permanent as humanity is. It should be recognized, analyzed, and consciously used for better communication," (Davis, 1953, p. 43). Kreps states that formal and informal communication channels can and should coexist since they both serve important and interdependent roles in an organization (1990).

Dialogue has been described as not only a necessary activity in an organization but also an important factor in the construction of self-concept. "Whenever we interact with others, we engage in conversations that affect our perceptions of ourselves" (Eisenberg, Goodall, & Trethewey, 2007, p. 43). Scholars have explored three dimensions of organizational dialogue, which represent an increasing extent of collaboration and respect for those involved—dialogue as equitable transaction, dialogue as

empathetic conversation, and dialogue as real meeting (Eisenberg et al, 2007). Even the most basic type of dialogue, equitable transaction, is rooted in fairness, as all participants are granted the ability to voice their opinions. In empathetic conversation, participants aim to understand the world as others see it. In the least common type, dialogue as real meeting, "a genuine communion can take place between people that transcends differences in role or perspective and that recognizes all parties' common humanity" (Eisenberg et al, 2007, p. 50). Though the third dimension, dialogue as real meetings, is rare, the human connection that results can play a critical part in transforming an organization into an energetic, enjoyable workplace with increased job satisfaction and reduced turnover rates among employees (Eisenberg et al, 2007). Others identify dialogue as an important dimension in expanding understanding in a way that cannot be achieved by the individual alone. "The result is a free exploration that brings to the surface the full depth of people's experience and thought, and yet can move beyond their individual views," (Senge, 2006, p. 224).

Towards Casual Conversation Theory

Salis and Williams (2009) refer to knowledge stocks as knowledge embedded in workers and knowledge flows as the system of harnessing that knowledge. One way to facilitate this flow of knowledge is by allowing conversation to occur naturally in the workplace, even if it appears to be mostly social. Personal contact enhances the exchange of tacit knowledge (Nonaka, 2008). Those natural conversations, in which people are most comfortable, often lead to the most fruitful ideas. Generally, the parties are more relaxed in these cases. In the absence of pressure to quickly come up with an idea in a limited period or formal setting, we find an increased propensity for idea generation. This is not a linear process, and there are no guarantees that work-related ideas will follow from all social conversations, but time spent conversing allows for back-and-forth dialogue that may not otherwise occur in a more structured formal meeting. It also provides a prime opportunity for tacit knowledge exchange. This can be articulated as—

Proposition 1: Casual conversation in the workplace leads to positive work-based ideas.

Casual conversation allows for a non-linear flow of information, as conceptualized by the framework in Figure 1. Not all dialogue will vacillate between personal and work-related topics as depicted, but conversations often alternate between personal/social and work-related subject matter, as well as hybrids of the two, several times during an exchange. An initial social exchange may serve as a precursor for subsequent a work-related exchange. This model illustrates that propensity for this type of discussion to generate tacit knowledge exchange, which in turn leads to new idea creation.

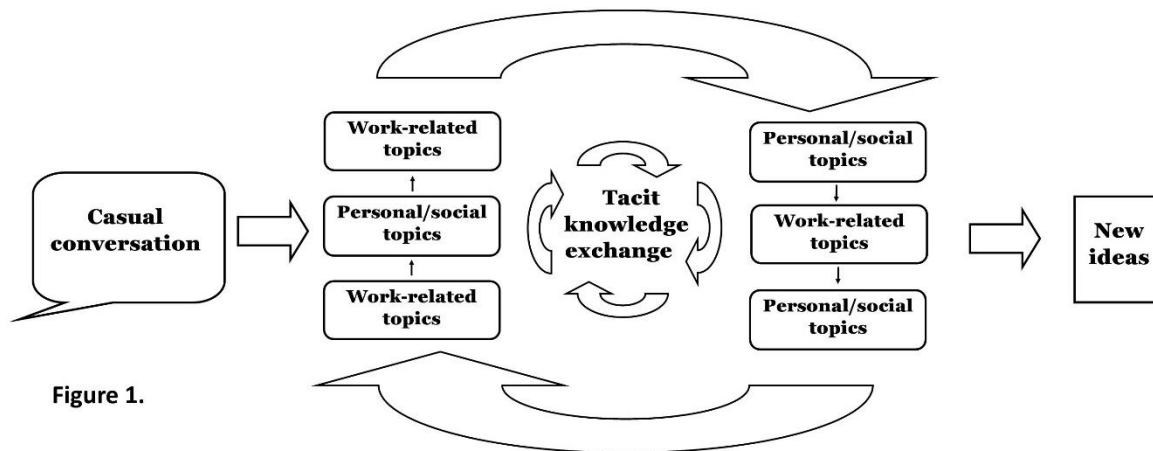


Figure 1.

An important consideration for this model is that casual conversation must be defined as natural, unforced discussions. Opportunities to foster such conversations can, however, be created without impeding the effectiveness of such conversations, if allowed to occur naturally. Individuals must be willing participants in such conversations for peak idea generation to occur.

Conversely, formal work-related conversation is highly linear, as depicted simply in Figure 2. Participants generally have pre-conceived expectations regarding the information sought. Once the seeker receives the information, the exchange typically ends, leaving little room for additional discussion, creativity, or idea generation.

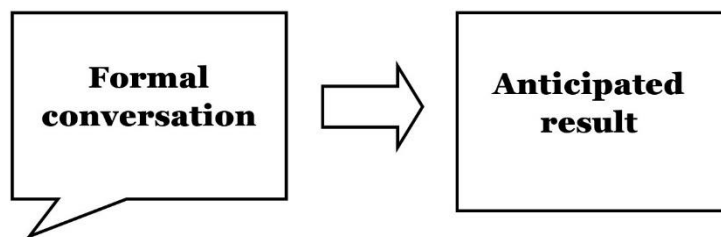


Figure 2.

A university archivist professional acquainted with the author describes an experience that began with a casual conversation in a social setting which led to a ripple effect of professional ideas and connections. A community member came to possess a 1949 university football program. Through casual conversation with the community member's neighbor who worked for the university, it was suggested that the program be digitized for archival purposes. The university employee facilitated the preservation of the document and through further casual conversation and discovered a disconnect in information sharing between the university library and athletic area. The archivist shared that the athletic department has many past programs in its possession, but it has not shared them for digital scanning and archiving purposes. The university employee shared the scanned program with the athletics area as a mechanism to start the conversation about future sharing of interesting artifacts between athletics and archives.

360 Degree Model of Ideal Workplace Conversation

Casual conversation about ongoing work projects can also be a helpful tool that fosters the free flow of ideas. An additional model within this casual conversation framework, the 360 Degree Model of Ideal Workplace Conversation, asserts that ongoing casual discussions among co-workers about their current projects should not only be permitted but also encouraged for the overall health of the organization.

The circular model places all members of the team equally as contributors to this information and idea sharing construct and does not give more power to higher ranking individuals. The discussion of current work information in a casual manner allows co-workers to test out ideas on one another, get helpful feedback, and have enough knowledge about departmental activities to step in and assist when needed. One important caveat could make implementation of this model difficult in certain settings. This 360 Degree Model works best when leaders are more concerned with the greater good of the organization and outcomes than personal advancement. Additionally, supervisors must not be threatened by the success of the members of their team. Fearing the success of subordinates is catastrophic to organizational performance. In a less than ideal state, the supervisor will remove oneself from the model, so sharing will be limited to lateral colleagues to the extent to which this is permissible or can be discretely achieved.

Casual conversation can also serve as a backstop to preventing negative outcomes. Normally there are official channels for the dissemination of important information, but those channels can break down. Free flowing casual conversation can in some cases fill that void, which can be articulated as—

Proposition 2: Casual conversation in the workplace can help organizations avert serious problems.

Casual office banter is not the primary way critical information should be transmitted. However, an environment which allows for the free flow of ideas and information can lead to conversations where critical information is revealed that allows crises to be prevented. Two examples may better explain this proposition. Two additional examples from a United States university better illustrate this proposition.

Case #1. A university administrator did not receive critical information about a new travel policy that would dramatically affect the way she prepared for students to attend an off-campus class. The administrator was omitted from the email that officially disseminated the information about the policy's existence as well as the significant increase to the paperwork that would result. It was through casual conversation in which another university administrator mentioned a new travel policy that made her aware that a policy change had been made. This conversation, which took place less than 24 hours before the class was scheduled to begin, allowed her to set into motion steps to secure the newly required documents from all the students enrolled in the class. Had this casual conversation not occurred, the class would have taken place without this paperwork in place, putting her, the students, and the university at risk.

Case #2. A casual conversation between a university staff member and a faculty member prevented 176 graduating student names from being omitted from the commencement program in 2017. One Friday afternoon in late 2017, the faculty member, referred to here as Henry, stopped to say hello to a staff member, referred to here as Sarah. Having just proofread the program for the upcoming commencement, Sarah remembered reading that one of Henry's students was graduating, so she congratulated him. Henry thanked her but indicated he had three students graduating that term. This led to Sarah contacting the university's records department, which had provided the list, to do some

additional research. Records determined that names had been omitted in error, provided a new list, and an updated program was designed and printed in time for the ceremony. Those directly involved in the situation have assessed it multiple times and determined that a single casual conversation is the only event that led to the accidental discovery of the error.

Proposition 3: Casual conversation in the workplace leads to increased work engagement, job satisfaction, and productivity, which benefits to the organization and the individual.

A key factor for employees engaging in casual conversation in the workplace is the extent to which the organizational culture supports such behavior. An important component in this proposition borrows from Gatekeeping Theory (Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim, and Wrigley, 2001). In the case of Casual Conversation Theory, gatekeepers set the tone for office dynamics. These forces determine the extent to which engaging in casual conversation is viewed as acceptable behavior. Feeling comfortable engaging in casual conversation is necessary for individuals to converse freely. Such dialogue should never be forced, but environments can be created to foster it. A study of firefighters in a large US city suggests that sharing meals may lead to better work-group performance (Kniffin, Wansink, Devine, and Sobal, 2015). Firefighters interviewed in the study shared that they believe this commensality plays a role in improving their function as a team.

A British study that examined more than 500 trading establishments suggests that productivity was enhanced by facilitating knowledge sharing through face-to-face communication (Salis and Williams, 2010). Social Presence Theory and Media Richness Theory, which both point to face-to-face communication as the channel richest in interpersonal clues, have relevance especially in times of organizational uncertainty. This is especially helpful when discussing confidential or sensitive workplace situations, as discussed by Kupritz and Cowell (2011).

Bakker defines work engagement as “an active, positive work-related state that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” and job satisfaction as “a more passive form of employee well-being” (Bakker, 2011, p. 265). Work engagement may be as a strong predictor of job performance, which serves as both an individual and an organizational benefit. Engaged employees often experience positive emotions, such as gratitude, joy, and enthusiasm; they also experience better health (Bakker, 2011). Furthermore, research shows that engagement is contagious, and engaged workers transfer their engaged state to others in their immediate work environment (Bakker and Xanthopoulou, 2009).

Existing literature analyzes the types of informational communication in workplaces by distribution channels. Benefits of direct voice communication have been identified in more structured settings. Casual Conversation Theory illustrates the opportunities that exist for tacit knowledge sharing and new idea creation in a less structured manner. There is a need for further exploration of the potential benefits under this framework. More engaged and satisfied employees are more likely to remain with a company, as discussed by Kundu and Lata (2017). Their proposed conceptual model of engagement begins with a supportive work environment, rooted partially in peer group interaction, which leads to organizational engagement and employee retention (Kundu and Lata 2017). The freedom to participate in casual conversation may be a mechanism to not only generate new ideas but also engage and therefore retain talented workers as well as their hidden tacit knowledge.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Casual conversation in the workplace is a powerful tool in informal learning, the exchange of knowledge, particularly tacit, and in the construction of individual identities and realities. It is a natural part of life, both inside and outside of the workplace. People invest their time, talent, and energies into improving their organizations. Empowering individuals to talk freely allows for the sharing and cultivation of new knowledge and ideas, which can benefit them in terms of increased productivity and job satisfaction, which also benefits the organization. Happy employees remain a part of organizations longer, which allows companies to also retain the tacit knowledge that resides in the minds of workers and collectively accounts for most of the organization's knowledge.

Extant research suggests that solutions to problems can occur during casual conversation between workers (Koester, 2006). Though conversation can vacillate between business and social talk, it is through these meanderings, when people feel comfortable to chat openly, a potential exists for creative ideas to emerge. Creating an environment where people are trusted and valued allows conversations to move towards "dialogue as real meeting" where new ideas and real possibilities for organizational and personal growth can occur (Eisenberg et al, 2007). It is in this space that people make deeper, more meaningful human connections that encourage further encounters and idea sharing and creation. Structures of different industries impact the likelihood that casual conversation will be permitted or encouraged. Certain fields, such as higher education, might be more willing to foster climates that are conducive to informal interactions. However, even within more rigid settings, such as factories, opportunities for casual conversations exist within limited times or locations (i.e. coffee or lunch breaks). These differences should be explored. Individual characteristics, such as gender, age, and rank can also impact the practice of casual conversation. The proposed model for ideal workplace communication is based on the notion of suspending rank and viewing others as equals, which may not always occur in practice. Open and honest communication also has the potential to lead to negative consequences, particularly for those in lesser positions of power, depending on the organizational climate.

Research suggests that up to 70% of learning happens informally, and informal learning leads to better retention of knowledge gained (Leslie et al, 1997). Since most informal learning is self-directed, casual conversation may be an important contributor to the learning process. Allowing employees to self-assess learning needs and empowering them to seek out new knowledge creates an empowering culture that will lead to increased motivation and performance.

The number of Americans working full-time from home has risen from 5.0% (2016 Census data) to 5.2% (2017 Census data), and additional workers may opt to work remotely on occasion, when organizational policies allow such affordances. The removal of shared physical space between workers had led to the emergence of virtual Communities of Practice (CoP), digital platforms designed to foster collaboration (Mavraki and Akoumianakis, 2014). Continued research into how CoP can support both interpersonal dialogue and information-processing may be increasingly important with more people working from home and conducting business globally (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017).

Casual conversation is a critical component to the processes of learning and knowledge generation, which are inexorably linked. "New knowledge always begins with the individual," writes Nonaka to describe how the spiral of knowledge begins (2008, p. 10). However, ideas must be shared in order to lead to higher levels of knowledge. "When employees invent new knowledge, they are also reinventing themselves, the company, and even the world" (Nonaka, 2008, p. 15).

Testing this theory may be challenging, especially since tacit knowledge is not always recognized by the individual who possesses it. However, developing a research protocol that combines quantitative and qualitative methods has the potential to shed light on the potential benefits of casual conversation, both for individuals and organizations. Casual Conversation Theory and the related 360 Degree Model of Ideal Workplace Conversation aim to articulate a powerful way for employees to contribute to organizations when they are empowered to freely converse with one another in the workplace.

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MOLLIE HARTUP is a doctoral student at Kent State University, studying Communication and Information. Additionally, she teaches part-time in the Youngstown State University Honors College and serves as editor of the YSU Magazine in the Office of Marketing & Communications. She also has previous professional experience working in broadcast and print media.