First impressions
Unless you have a job as a hermit, your work will involve interacting with others. There’ll be colleagues of course, but maybe also members of the public, suppliers, business partners, government officials, and more. It’ll obviously make life easier for everyone involved, including you, if you get on well with them rather than alienating them in some way. This chapter considers some of the basics of social interaction in the workplace, suggesting who you need and don’t need to know, how to handle small talk, remember names, be a good listener and communicate well both face to face and on the phone.

**Thin-slicing**

A footballer receives the ball and, almost instantaneously, passes it to the feet of someone else on his team. The speed of thought is bewildering. This, and other examples of sportspeople behaving almost instinctively as they shoot for the hoop, drive a forehand across court, slam a baseball or cricket ball into a gap between fielders – they’re all the result of what psychologists call ‘thin-slicing’. In other words, people make fast decisions and perform actions on the basis of split-second observations of thin slices of information.

But it’s not just sportsmen and sportswomen who do it. Apparently that’s what we all do most of the time and, surprisingly perhaps, we’re usually right. So what’s it got to do with
workplace skills? Well, the suggestion is that that’s how we form impressions of others. We meet them, form an opinion of them within the first few seconds and, from then on, just notice things which confirm that impression.

This may come as an unpleasant surprise if you’ve spent ages preparing for an interview or working out how to impress the future in-laws, because it suggests that the first handshake, eye contact, hairstyle choice, colour of jacket or goodness knows what else has already made up the mind of the person you’re meeting before you’ve uttered a word. On the other hand, if you’re aware of how this process works, you can focus on those first impressions and make sure you use them to your advantage.

Need to know or need to avoid

There isn’t a handy ‘people check list’ we can offer you because each workplace will have different dynamics and procedures, but we can generalise about the sort of people you should try to get to know and those you should avoid. You’ll obviously need to meet those in your peer group, your boss, her boss, people in other departments and in human resources. Once you get settled, you’ll have a better idea of who to cultivate and who to avoid. But don’t think of every encounter as a transaction. Be natural, open and develop positive contacts with like-minded colleagues. It won’t just make the job easier; it’ll also make day-to-day life more pleasant.

Workplaces develop hierarchies which are sometimes signalled by expressions such as ‘upper’, ‘middle’ or ‘lower management’. There obviously has to be such a structure and some people do wield more power than others, but don’t underestimate the importance of the support services, secretaries or personal assistants.
Choose with care

Mentors are a great help both when you’re starting out and as you settle in and need more detailed information. Some companies assign one to you as part of their policy. This is fine but the relationship with them doesn’t always work out as well as it should, so there’s no harm in trying to persuade someone you get on with (preferably someone with influence) to be an informal mentor. And beware of anyone who tells you things ‘in confidence’, especially if it’s something they’re supposed to be keeping secret. You need to be with people you can trust.

brilliant dos and don’ts

Do cultivate

✔ People who make things happen
✔ People who give you advice, support and feedback
✔ People who provide access to information
✔ People who can introduce you to others
✔ People who’ve shown they’re willing to help you

Don’t waste time with …

✗ People who talk too much
✗ People on the same level as you who are overly competitive
✗ People who have negative attitudes about work-related things
✗ People who depress you or create stress for those around them

First contacts

Ideally, whoever you’re meeting, the impression you want to create is that you’re professional, confident and likeable. This may sound cynical and false, but making and developing contacts within your own organisation and others is a positive, necessary skill to acquire. Whatever your opinion of your own
worth, success will depend on working with others and being aware of what’s going on in your particular field and industry. Meeting and getting to know new people, expanding your circle of acquaintances and making new friendships will all help you to learn more about the business you’re in and establish you as part of it.

*Don’t hold back*
If there’s someone you’d like to meet or you think might help you in some way, don’t just wait for it to happen; find a way of getting to know them. Send them an email, call them on the phone or get someone to introduce you. Find out the sort of things they like and whether you have any common interests. And don’t just concentrate on what they might do for you; think about what you could offer them. It sounds transactional but that’s true of so many social contacts that it’s a normal way of interacting.

*Keep in touch*
Once you’ve made contact, make sure you maintain it. Make a note of their names and addresses and any other useful information. Invite them to special events or social occasions, send them things you read in the papers or journals that you think they’ll be interested in, and don’t forget to congratulate them on domestic or other events, such as engagements, marriages, new babies or, of course, promotions at work.

If you make a promise, make sure you keep it. If someone asks you to do something for them, do it quickly, with no strings attached, and show them they can trust you. Giving is as important as taking. Be sincere. If you’re always on the make, you’ll soon become one of the people others are trying to avoid.

In the end, it boils down to showing mutual respect. Be ready to make your own judgements but recognise the value of the opinions of others.
Introductions

Remember the importance of first impressions. When you’re meeting people for the first time, always stand up or move towards them as they approach (even if they’ve said ‘Don’t get up’). Make and keep eye contact, smile, offer your hand for them to shake and tell them your first and last name in a clear, friendly tone. If it’s one of your peers or the setting’s informal, you can just give your first name.

Be ready for any questions they might ask by having in your mind a sort of brief summary about yourself – where you’re from, your university or previous job, your role in the company, the people you’ll be working with. Keep it all open, friendly and interesting.

brilliant tip

When you start work, you’ll probably get to meet senior people who won’t be so accessible later on as you settle into your place in the organisation. This is a good chance to begin to establish yourself, so don’t be afraid to say something. There’s no need to give them a stand-up routine or be pushy or over-enthusiastic, but a simple, confident ‘hello’ will create a positive impression. It’s that vital ‘thin-slice’.

brilliant tip

Don’t underestimate the importance of the handshake. There’s a happy medium between the limp offering that makes them feel they’re holding a damp rag and the bone-crunching, macho power-play. Just squeeze their hand firmly and shake it two or three times from the elbow not the wrist. It should be a calm, reassuring gesture, not a frenzied sort of arm-dance.
**In a group**

If there are several people starting with a company at the same time, introductions may be made in a group. Frequently this means you all sit in a big circle and introduce yourselves to the rest one by one. In some ways, this is harder than the individual introduction because it’s a sort of performance. You feel you’ve got to interest or amuse the audience as well as tell them who you are, so you should give it plenty of thought beforehand because it’s an experience that may be repeated at training courses or meetings.

The people who organise these meetings or courses often try to make the introductions more interesting by asking you questions about yourself. Some common ones are:

- Do you have an interesting fact or story to tell us about yourself?
- What’s the most embarrassing thing that’s happened to you?
- Which five words best describe you?
- What are your hobbies?
- If you weren’t doing this job, what would you do?

You can no doubt add more of the same. They’re all things you can prepare (or invent) to project a favourable image of yourself.

**Remembering names**

For most of us, seeing a person and trying desperately to remember his name is a familiar experience. In a way, forgetting his name can seem like an insult to him, perhaps suggesting he’s not important to you. And, if you do remember, it has the reverse effect, making him feel important and valued. So try to develop a technique for remembering names when you’re introduced. At some point, you may also need to introduce them to someone else and it’s embarrassing if you find yourself asking ‘What’s your name again?’
So, listen carefully the first time you hear the name. Focus on it the first time he says it, keeping eye contact with him and repeating it in one of the normal formulas, such as ‘Nice to meet you, Richard’. Don’t be distracted by other things; make a mental note of it and, if you didn’t hear it clearly, apologise and ask him to repeat it.

Try to connect it visually with some aspect of the person, such as the shape of his face, colour of his eyes, his height. Don’t choose something that may change, like the style of his glasses, the colour of his jacket or his Homer Simpson tie. This will give you a hook to help fix it in your mind. Try also to use his name as often as you can in the conversation you have with him (without sounding like a parrot), and use it again when you say goodbye. After every meeting with anyone new, write down their names, adding the feature you associate it with too, if you like. Just seeing it written down will help you to remember it.

And if you genuinely can’t remember it, ask again as soon as possible. It needn’t be embarrassing; lots of people have the same difficulty, but if you are embarrassed, suggest exchanging business cards with him.

**brilliant tip**

The excuse ‘I’m terrible at remembering names’ is feeble and won’t convey a good impression to the other person, so don’t rely on it. And don’t accept that it’s true. Work at being good at it, try out different techniques to find one that works for you. It’s an extremely important skill and you can certainly improve at it.

Small talk

The introduction is important, but it’s just the beginning. If it’s followed by an awkward silence, that all-important first impression is going to be a negative one. So develop the skill of making
small talk. Sometimes, it’s not easy, but if you work at it and become proficient, you’ll make the other person feel more comfortable and help to project a positive image of yourself. So …

- **… try to make them feel important**
  Don’t assume that what interests you will be equally enthralling for them. However strongly you feel about a topic, you’ll be more successful if you find out what interests them and focus on that. It’ll make them feel at ease, and it’s easier to build a relationship by massaging their ego than by indulging your own. Again, that may sound cynical but it’s just realistic. They’ll be in their comfort zone – you just need to find what their special interest is. Once you’ve found it, you won’t need to talk as much because they’ll take over.

- **… try to find some common ground**
  It’s even better if you can find an interest you share. It might be a country you’ve both been to, an exhibition, movie or play you’ve both seen, a book you’ve read. Whatever it is, make sure you focus on the similarities between you rather than the differences.

- **… avoid inappropriate subjects**
  These will vary according to circumstances but you can probably list for yourself the sort of things that you shouldn’t discuss when you’re with someone, especially a stranger, in a business context.

- **… mean what you say**
  The way we’re talking about this may be making it sound like role play, but that’s not the intention. OK, it’s ‘only’ small talk, but it’s serving a purpose and it helps if you’re sincere. If you’re not, most people you speak to will sense that and you’ll go down in their estimation and seem like a poser. Keep it light, pleasant and interesting, and don’t indulge in flattery.

It’s better for everyone if this sort of small talk is enjoyable. If you enjoy the time you spend with them, it’s more likely they’ll feel the same way. But don’t get stressed about it; the more you
do it, the easier it gets. And remember, they’ll usually be far more interested in their own lives than yours.

brilliant dos and don’ts

Do discuss

- How you got to the meeting and any interesting things that occurred en route
- Cultural or sporting events
- Books, films, magazine or newspaper articles
- Happy occasions such as weddings or births or upbeat news items
- General business events or news

Don’t discuss

- Their or your marital status (including divorce and any other aspects of marriage that should stay private)
- Matters concerning health
- Personal finance (including salary)
- Things which could be perceived as rude or racist
- Religion and politics of any persuasion

And, even though you think a particular joke is killingly funny, remember that they may not share your sense of humour so, at least in the early stages of an acquaintanceship, it’s probably wise to avoid jokes altogether.

Be a good listener

If you find yourself in a conversation where the other person is doing most of the talking, you’re doing a good job. You don’t want to seem shy, reticent or submissive, but listening attentively and responding with a relevant remark at the right time
is a great skill and will earn you at least as much approval as if you were a brilliant conversationalist. It shows you’re interested in the other person and what they’re saying and that you have the self-confidence to let them have the floor.

It’s not just a passive skill. Once you’ve found a topic they’re interested in, encourage them to speak and make sure they take up at least half of the conversation. If they look as if they need encouragement, ask their opinion with open-ended questions.

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**brilliant definition**

**Open-ended question**

One which typically begins with words such as 'Why', 'How', or phrases such as 'Tell me about...'. Its aim is to produce a full answer based on the personal knowledge and/or feelings of the person being asked.

**Closed-ended question**

One which encourages a short or single-word answer.

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**Concentrate on what’s being said**

Give the person speaking your undivided attention. Don’t let things such as her appearance or accent distract you; ignore wasps, flies or other nuisances, and resist the temptation to eavesdrop on a nearby conversation. Don’t try working out a response as you’re listening, and don’t interrupt her unless you want to ask a question or make sure you’ve understood what she’s said. It might be useful to summarise her words when you do this, just to make sure. And if you don’t have time to listen, fix a time when you’re both free to continue the conversation.

**Don’t just listen selectively**

You should be using more than your ears as you listen. Watch her body language, think about what she’s saying, listen for underlying meanings, emotional signals, things that are left...
unspoken. When she’s finished, you should be able to list for yourself all the key points she made.

**Keep an open mind**

You may start forming opinions about the person who’s speaking or you may already have preconceptions about him. Don’t let that get in the way of how you interpret what he says, and never assume you know what he’s going to say or that he means something different from what his words suggest. You should be looking for points on which you agree rather than differences. Don’t start silently arguing with him in your head and don’t get emotive or defensive.

Don’t just pretend to listen; let the person see that you’re hearing what he’s saying by maintaining eye contact with him and making supportive comments and gestures. And, whatever you see out of the corner of your eye, resist the temptation to look past him at it. That’s very rude and you can be sure he’ll notice it.

In the end, it comes down to empathy. If you try to see things from his point of view, it’ll be easier to get on.

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**brilliant recap**

- The importance of creating a positive first impression.
- How to identify and deal with people you want to contact and those you want to avoid.
- Introducing yourself to individuals and in groups.
- Tips on how to remember names.
- The importance of small talk and some strategies on how to become proficient at using it.