

Can Gossiping on the Job Really Hurt You? by Beverly West

We all do it from time to time. Whether it's complaining about the latest comp-time policy change with your coworker in the file room or dishing about the latest spat between the CFO and the clerk in purchasing, gossiping on the job is almost an inevitable part of corporate culture.

But is gossiping a positive way to build relationships, trade information for advancement and gauge the emotional health of the corporate community? Or is it akin to a toxic virus that spreads and ultimately weakens an organization's overall health, threatening your job security, chances for career advancement and professional happiness?

As with most things involving human interaction, there are two sides to this common coin. Use the following advice to ensure you don't let your chitchat get in the way of your career.

Peter Post, codirector of the Emily Post Institute and coauthor of [*The Etiquette Advantage in Business: Personal Skills for Professional Success*](#), argues that there is a lot wrong with a little harmless gossip. "Gossiping and rumor-mongering add stress to the workplace," Post says. "Create stress in the workplace, and you create a situation in which people are not focusing on doing their work." This is why many companies have corporate policies that specifically restrict or prohibit on-the-job gossip and why management may not look kindly on those who engage in it.

But the overall effects of negative gossip don't necessarily suggest you should completely refrain from being in the know about situations around you. In fact, many psychologists believe that not engaging in a little office gossip can actually hurt your career.

Siobhan Mellor, clinical psychologist and author of the research paper, "Gossip -- the Nation's Favorite Pastime," believes that the right kind of gossip can be good for you. "Getting the latest gossip about the behavior of others helps build a social map for what is accepted, weird, bad -- and even what kinds of actions improve our status and what doesn't," she says.

Kate Adams, an editor who worked for a major New York publishing company, recalls being chastised in her peer performance review, because she had admitted to not being in the know about her boss's sudden resignation in favor of a new position at another house. "I thought the polite thing to do was to pretend that I hadn't noticed my boss leaving for long lunches and apparently going on interviews," says Adams. "As an assistant, I always tried to cover for my boss, and I thought that included not talking about her obvious job search. But my coworkers thought it was a sign that I was out of the loop and that I was somebody who wasn't going places."

Karen Kirchner, managing partner of Career Management Consulting based in Stamford, Connecticut, believes that you can indulge in a little on-the-job gossip safely and without guilt, as long as you follow these seven rules:

- Only gossip now and then, and be aware of who is listening.
- Don't spend too much time with known office gossips, or you may be judged guilty by association.
- Listen carefully, but say as little as possible. Don't appear to be an ambulance chaser or a tattletale so that you can be the one with the scoop.
- Work on the principle that whatever you say will be repeated. Think about the implications of this before you speak.
- Consider the source of gossip and the source's hidden motives. People sometimes plant information to manipulate a situation.
- Do not badmouth people; your comments will often come back to haunt you as alliances shift in the workplace.
- If something you say gets back to a friend or colleague in a way that you wish it hadn't, apologize and be honest. This is the only way of salvaging your reputation and limiting the damage.