



5 PROBLEMS ON THE PHONE

Most people spend more time and energy going around problems than in trying to solve them.

HENRY FORD, FOUNDER OF FORD MOTOR COMPANY

- 1 It's been said that 'When the phone rings, there's usually a problem on the other end of it.' What sort of problems do people phone you with at work? Share examples with a partner.
- 2 Complete the text below by underlining the correct words.

How to get rid of chatterboxes on the phone

We are living in the age of telephony. Over half the planet now has a mobile. In Finland, where they have more mobiles per person than anywhere else on earth, 40% of the country's exports are Nokia phones. Whenever we want, wherever we want, we can get in (a) **communication / touch**.

But when we do, it seems we can never get to the (b) **point / business**. Up to two hours in every working day are wasted in small talk on the phone. And great skill and determination are needed to escape the deadly game of social chit-chat – 'How are you? ... Settling (c) **in / down** to the new job? ... How's Ellen? ... And the kids? ... Hasn't your eldest just gone to college? ... How (d) **life / time** flies! ... Oh, I hear you're moving house as well. ... Did you have a nice holiday, by the way? ... I suppose you haven't heard the (e) **last / latest**, then? ... Well, I'm not supposed to say, but there's a (f) **rumour / gossip** going about ...'

Of course, what you really want to say in these circumstances is 'Look, I haven't got all (g) **year / day**. Either state your

business or kindly get off the phone,' but professional courtesy forbids it. Here, then, is the definitive executive guide to getting rid of chatterboxes on the phone.

GETTING DOWN TO BUSINESS The most tactful way of bringing the conversation round to the subject of business is to ask in a slightly louder than normal voice 'What (h) **can / could** I do for you?' If you know the caller, you could try 'I (i) **expect / believe** you're calling about ...' and then mention anything you can think of. They, hopefully, will reply 'Er, no, actually, it's about something else' and you can finally (j) **pull / cut** the chat and get down to business. Should this strategy fail, you may have to resort to a firmer 'Was there (k) **nothing / something** you wanted to talk to me about?'

ENDING THE CONVERSATION This is more difficult. The trick is not to seem too abrupt. 'Anyway, ...', though a clear signal to most people that you want to end the call, is much too subtle for chatterboxes. Try instead 'Well, I mustn't (l) **hold / keep** you,' 'I'll let you (m) **get / go** on' or the more insistent 'I'll have to let you (n) **go / leave** now.' If you feel that sounds a little too harsh, friendlier alternatives include 'Well, (o) **listen / see**, it's been great talking to you,' 'We must (p) **come / get** together soon' or 'Oh, one last (q) **thing / point** and then I really must go.' Of course, with an incurable chatterbox this last alternative may be asking for trouble!


DRASTIC MEASURES In genuine emergencies the following may be used: 'Ah, someone's just this minute (r) **dropped / stepped** into the office. I'll have to ring (s) **off / out**.' Or 'I've got an international call just come (t) **in / over** on the other line. Can I call you back?' And, if all else fails, you can always try 'Hello? Hello? Are you still (u) **there / here**?' Of course the secret with this one is that when the caller says 'Yes, I'm still here,' resist the temptation to reply 'Well, I can't hear you!'

► Glossary

chatterbox person who talks a lot about unimportant matters

24/7 24 hours a day, 7 days a week

- 3 Do you agree with the writer of the article that small talk on the phone wastes time at work?

- 4  **2.03** Listen to someone trying unsuccessfully to get a caller off the phone. Raise your hand when you hear them use one of the 'getting rid' expressions mentioned in the article you just read.

5 Work with a partner to practise dealing with a chatterbox. Speaker A see page 140. Speaker B see page 147.

DEALING WITH COMPLAINTS

1 In 2009 American businessman Howard Schaffer got so fed up wasting time trying to get the phones in his office fixed, he worked out it had cost him \$5,481.16, billed the phone company for it and was paid! Have you ever wanted to do that to a company that wasted your time?

2 When was the last time you made a formal complaint about something? Was it in person, in writing or on the phone? Were you satisfied with the way it was handled? Tell a partner about it.

3 Put the following stages of handling a customer complaint into the most likely order:

1

2

3

4

5

6

- suggest possible solutions
- get the details
- end on a positive note
- agree on a course of action
- greet and reassure the caller
- listen and empathise

4 Which of the following expressions would be most inappropriate at each of the stages in 3? Delete one from each set of three below. Then underline which of the remaining two you prefer.

Stage 1 a How can I help you?

b What can I do for you?

c What's the matter, then?

Stage 2 a Can you tell me exactly what the problem is?

b What exactly is your problem?

c What seems to be the problem?

Stage 3 a Tell me about it! I know just how you feel.

b I can understand exactly how you feel.

c I can understand how upset you must be.

Stage 4 a Well, I suppose I could send you a new one, but I can't give you a refund. Sorry.

b I can't give you a refund, I'm afraid, but I can certainly send you a new one. How's that?

c Unfortunately, we're not authorised to give refunds, but what I can do is send you a brand new one. How would that be?

Stage 5 a Is that all OK for you?


b Are you satisfied now?

c Are you happy with that?

Stage 6 a I'm so pleased we've managed to sort this out. Was there anything else?

b Glad to be of assistance. Is there anything else I can help you with?

c Good. Anything else or is that it?

5  **2.04** Listen to a customer services adviser at iDeals, a computer supplies retail chain, dealing with a complaint and compare what she says with your choices in 4.

6 A 'flame' is an angry or insulting e-mail. Have you ever received or been tempted to write one?

7 Work with a partner. Read the flames you and your partner wrote below and take turns to hold the telephone conversations that might have followed. Caller, be as direct as you like. Receiver, try to calm the caller down and deal with their complaint.

Why do you never answer your phone?
May I suggest you turn your MP3 off occasionally?

What I want to know is, are you making any progress on the Samsung report or not? And if not, why not? No, don't even bother answering that. I already know you've been far too busy with more important matters to even get round to starting it. Correct?

Look, I asked you to type up this report ages ago and you know full well I've got to have it for Thursday's meeting with the 'death squad' from head office.

This is the second time you've fouled things up and I'll be reminding you of that when your probationary period finally ends.

So, I'll ask you once again. **WHEN WILL THE SAMSUNG REPORT BE READY?**

For the third time this week, **WHERE IS OUR ORDER?**

We ordered \$15,000 of shirts from you three – yes, three – months ago and so far what have you sent us? That's right, nothing! Not even so much as an e-mail to explain why it's taking so long. This is an utter disgrace.

You call yourselves the world's leading promotional products company and you can't even manage to organise 6,000 polo shirts with a simple company logo on. **Frankly, it's pathetic. I notice you had no problem debiting our account for the \$15,000, though.**


I'm sure it's too much to expect an apology, but if I don't see those shirts within the next 48 hours, I'll see you in court. **GOT IT?**

8 Rewrite the e-mail you sent in 7 to make it more polite but equally assertive. Use the prompts below to help you

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>a Unfortunately / unable / reach / phone
Can / tell / managing / make / progress / Samsung report? // having / problems / please let / know / soon / possible // understand / been preoccupied / other matters / may not / even / made a start yet / although / hope / not / case did ask / some time ago / this report / as you know / do need / urgently / Thursday's meeting / people / head office
not / first time / let me down / consequently / shall have / discuss / matter / when / probationary period ends
really must know today how / longer / going / take</p> | <p>b again writing / regard / order / ref no 099X
records show / order / \$15,000 / shirts / placed three months / but so far / received anything // Nor / sent / e-mail explaining / reason / delay // afraid / quite unacceptable
You advertise / world's leading promotional products company // therefore / find / inability / take care / simple order like this both surprising / disappointing // notice / however / were more efficient / debiting / account / sum / \$15,000
should like / delivery / 48 hours / together / apology // Otherwise / no alternative / hand / matter over / legal department // hope / made myself clear</p> |
|--|--|

9 Exchange the rewritten e-mails with your partner and hold the two telephone conversations again. How do these calls compare with the ones you had in 7?

TACKLING PROBLEMS

1  **2.05** Listen to an overheard telephone conversation. Take notes and, with a partner, try to work out what the problem is.


It sounds like ...

It seems as though ...

There's been some kind of ..., by the sound of it.

I'm not (exactly) sure whether ... or whether ...


It's definitely something to do with ...

2  **2.06** Now listen to both sides of the conversation in 1 and check your ideas.

3 You heard the following idiomatic expressions in 2. Can you remember the missing words? The first two letters are given. Use the definitions in brackets to help you.

- a I'm working fl _____ out. (I'm working as quickly and as hard as possible.)
- b It completely sl _____ my mind. (I completely forgot to do it.)
- c We're sn _____ under at the moment. (We've got too much work to deal with.)

4 What would you do in Graham and Piotr's situation?

5  **2.07** Listen to Graham and Piotr's second conversation and compare your solutions with theirs.

6 Match the halves of the following sentences. You heard them all in 5.

- | | |
|-----------------------|---|
| a Can you get hold | of sending someone else out here? |
| b I don't suppose | to have a phone number for the promotions people? |
| c Do you happen | getting some brochures to me in Polish? |
| d Is there any chance | of the organisers? |
| e I'll check | what I can do, but I can't promise anything. |
| f I'll see | with Liz and see if she can spare Kim for a few days. |
| g Would you mind | you remembered to put another CD player in? |
| h Is there any point | the minute I get off the phone. |
| i Are you absolutely | if we got a local Polish interpreter in? |
| j I'll look into it | to me. |
| k Could I ask you | in sending the ones we've got in Russian? |
| l Would it help | to that right away. |
| m I'll get on | to hurry that up a bit, please? |
| n Leave it | sure we didn't order a reprint of the Polish ones? |

7 Work with a partner to practise solving problems on the phone. Speaker A see page 141. Speaker B see page 149.



05 PROBLEMS ON THE PHONE

LANGUAGE LINKS

Vocabulary: Phone, fax and e-mail

Complete the telephone conversation using the words in the box.

around as back by down down for in
off off off on on on on on on
out out out up up up up under

A design agency office is in chaos. The phone is ringing. Tina finally answers it.

- A Hello? Tina Mallon.
B Tina. Thank goodness you're there!
A Hi, Geoff. What's (1) _____?
B Listen. I'm (2) _____ a bit of a mess here.
A Where are you?
B I'm just (3) _____ my way to see the people at FlexiPak and you'll never guess ... I've left the file with the visuals in it back at the office!
A Oh dear ... Well, can I fax them through to you at their office?
B No, I don't think they'd come (4) _____ properly.
A Geoff, I'm (5) _____ to my neck in it here. I can't access my e-mail because the server is (6) _____ this morning and I'm rushed (7) _____ my feet, running (8) _____ trying to sort things (9) _____ with IT and get those posters (10) _____ to Milan by midday.
B Look, Tina, this is urgent. Could you go over the road to the print shop, scan the visuals and ask them to e-mail them to me (11) _____ attachments? I'll give you FlexiPak's e-mail address.
A Geoff, I'm sorry, but I'm really snowed (12) _____ here.
B Tina, I wouldn't ask you if I wasn't desperate. I haven't got time to come (13) _____ and pick them (14) _____.
A Well, maybe it would be easier just to send them (15) _____ dispatch rider. Hang (16) _____. Let me take (17) _____ the details. Which visuals do you need exactly? Hello? Geoff?
B Tina?
A Geoff? You're breaking (18) _____. Are you (19) _____ your mobile? I can't hear you!
B Hello? Oh, what's going (20) _____ with this phone? I can't be (21) _____ of range. I must be running low (22) _____ batteries. No, it's charged. Tina, can you hear me? I'll have to ring (23) _____ and look (24) _____ a payphone or something. Tina?

Tina hangs up, smiling.

- A Now, maybe I can finally get (25) _____ with some work!

Grammar: Complex question formation

Polite question forms

Rewrite the requests and offers to make them sound friendlier and more polite using the words in brackets to help you. Make any necessary changes to grammar.

- a Can you turn the air conditioning up a bit? (think/could)
Do you think you could turn the air conditioning up a bit?
b Can you help me? (wonder/could)
c Don't mention this to anyone else. (could/ask you)
d Can you do some overtime next week? (think/could/ask)
e Do you want me to put in a good word for you? (would/like me)
f Can you stop whistling while I'm trying to concentrate? (would/mind not)
g Is it OK to leave early today? (do/mind/if)
h Do you want me to give you a few days to think about it? (would/help/give)
i Can I ask you a personal question? (Would/mind/I)
j When is Mr Alvarez coming back? (happen/know)
k Can you lend me €50 until Friday? (don't suppose/could you?)

Being polite takes longer!

Modal verbs (*could, would*) soften a request that may be unwelcome.

'Type 1' conditionals (*Do you mind if I leave early?*) make requests more diplomatic.

'Type 2' conditionals (*Would you mind if I left early?*) make requests even more diplomatic.

Do you happen to know ...? is useful when you're not sure the other person knows the answer to your question.

I don't suppose you could ... , could you? is good way of asking people to do you a favour.

Phrase bank: Small talk on the phone

Put one word in each box below to make 30 things you could say to encourage a bit of small talk during a business call. Contractions (*You're, How's* etc.) count as one word.

- a life / business / the family / it going / the new job / your golf doing / your course going?
- b doing / keeping / enjoying Paris / getting on in Manila / settling down in Seville? / settling in at Goldman Sachs?
- c the promotion / the new baby / winning the Dubai contract / finally getting your MBA!
- d moving house / getting married / about to visit Russia / about to sign a deal with Samsung, is that right?
- e been on holiday / come back from Buenos Aires / opened a new office in Cologne?
- f the news / the latest / from Ron lately / about the Asian situation?
- g job on the Siemens report / luck with presentation tomorrow, by the way!

Getting down to business on the phone

Complete the ways of switching from small talk to business. The initial letters are given.

- a A ...
- b S , w c I d f y ?
- c I e y c a ...
- d W t s y w t t t m a ?

Subtle
↓
Direct

Requesting assistance on the phone

Put the words in bold in the correct order.

- a **mind** you would letting me know when they arrive?
- b **hold** you can of get someone in accounts?
- c **ask** I could to you arrange that for me?
- d **chance** there is any of extending the deadline?
- e you suppose could don't I speed things up a bit, could you?
- f **have** you happen do to Alicia's mobile number?
- g **sure** can't absolutely you you are do anything today?

Offering assistance on the phone

Complete the following using the pairs of verbs in the box.

check + see help + give leave + get look + give see + promise worry + get

- a I'll what I can do, but I can't anything.
- b I'll with IT and if they can help.
- c Don't , I'll on to it right away.
- d I'll into it. me an hour.
- e Would it if I got someone to you a hand?
- f Why don't you it with me and I'll back to you?

Ending a call

Each sentence ending in **bold** has been switched with another. Switch them back to make eight ways of ending a call.

- a I mustn't let you go now.
- b I'll let you get together soon.
- c Someone's just come in on the other line.
- d We must get on.
- e It's been great running a bit late.
- f I'll have to keep you.
- g I've got a call just stepped into the office.
- h Listen, I'm talking to you.