We are not geeks

Level: Intermediate upwards
Timing: 90 minutes plus
Material needed: One copy of the student worksheets and Vocabulary record per student
Group size: Any, but will work best with a minimum of two students

Overview

This lesson plan, for both pre-experience and in-work business students, is based around an original article first published in *Business Spotlight* Issue 4/2012. The article is a dialogue between two people who work in middle management positions in two very different companies from the same field of business. They talk about their working conditions, benefits and how people perceive them, their work and how they view themselves.

The tasks in the student's notes encourage the students to learn and use new business vocabulary and functional language and also to practise useful business skills such as asking and answering questions about their place of work and working conditions.

The teacher's notes provide suggestions for teaching and learning strategies as well as ideas on how to present the tasks in the classroom, any necessary answer keys and extension tasks (for in class or as homework).

Warmer

This checks that the students don't start reading the article without understanding the absolute pivotal key word *geeks*. It also allows and even encourages them to make assumptions which then may or may not be reflected in the article.

Key:
1. c; 2. students' own answers

Key words and expressions

The students work their way through the article, from start to end, to find expressions that mean the same as or similar to the definitions 1–14. Divide the task between students, so that one looks for the answers to 1–7 on the first page of the article (page 2 of the worksheet) and the other looks for the remaining answers on the second page

of the article (page 3 of the worksheet), and get them to exchange their answers.

Key:

1. supervise; 2. corporate environment; 3. alternative; 4. auditorium; 5. ping-pong; 6. beanbags; 7. massages; 8. round; 9. auditor; 10. accountancy practices; 11. spreadsheets; 12. recruiting; 13. odd; 14. hierarchy

Questions

Students read the article and decide where the six questions provided best fit. In order to do this, they should read the answers that are given after each gap and decide which questions could prompt the speaker to answer as they do. The students should write the questions in the (1–6) lines provided. These questions will be used again in a later task.

Key:

1. Where do you work?; 2. What about you?; 3. What's it like working there?; 4. How do you actually get any work done?; 5. What made you change?; 6. Would you want to change firms?

Comprehension and content questions

1. Students answer the questions with information from the article.

Key:

a. quite a formal corporate environment; a big open-plan office with groups of six desks; probably designed by someone who specializes in large corporate offices; standard white everywhere and large blocks of bright colours; his director sits opposite him, and everyone in the team is grouped around a senior person
b. it's insane (crazy, and therefore not formal); has an Alice-in-Wonderland look (there's a door shaped like a keyhole to get from one building to another and a red carpet in the middle); an open auditorium; tables for playing ping-pong, table football and pool; a room with lots of beanbags and computer games where people can go and chill out
c. Whiteman's company: comfortable chairs and free coffee. Warwick's company: a canteen, where you can get snacks, breakfast and hot and cold lunches; croissants and muffins are freshly delivered every morning; there is also a fully stocked bar for Friday-night drinks; all of these are free.
d. Warwick's company offers massages (by means of a lottery). Whiteman's boss buys his team drinks after work on Fridays.
e. Whiteman is expected to turn up to work in an expensive suit. Warwick says that if someone did that in her company they would look out of place. People in her office sometimes walk around without any shoes.

f. Warwick meets her finance director each week and if a decision needs to be made, they make it. There is no hierarchy, no committee. Whiteman says that the the slow decision-making in traditional firms can make you feel removed from the process – although things are faster at his company, Network Rail.

2. Using the key words (office design, availability of food, etc.) as prompts, the students make notes about what their working conditions are like. They should compare their notes with their answers in part 1, and then talk about them in pairs or small groups.

Guided conversation

This task brings together the previous three tasks by asking the students to talk to a partner – preferably one from another company or department – using the questions, key words and notes that they have already looked at, dealt with and prepared. After the students have had their chat or talk with a partner, ask them to repeat the task with a new partner. To add additional structure to the task, tell them to start and end their conversations in the same way as Whitesman and Warwick, i.e. using the same opening and closing words.

> ### Teaching and learning strategy: Personalizing parts of a dialogue or interview
>
> Many articles, dialogues (especially those in course books) and interviews lend themselves nicely to personalization tasks. Two simple ways of doing this and providing the students with speaking practice which follows a given structure are:
>
> 1. Highlight all the facts, such as names, places, dates and prices, and ask the students to replace them with their own personal details or ones that they have invented.
>
> 2. Highlight all the questions and use these to recreate and personalize the interview (see exercise 5).

Web task

Students follow the link and look at a particular website to find out more about *The Sunday Times* 'Best Companies to Work For' lists, as mentioned in the article, and answer the three questions in the exercise. Explain to students that they will need to click on links in the left-hand side

bar to find the answers. The answers can be found under *The Sunday Times* 'Best Companies to Work for' links: 'How it works' and 'Published lists'.

Key:
1. Companies must:
* *Have been in existence for at least 3 years on the 1st March 2013*
* *Have a minimum of 50 full-time employees or part-time equivalents working in the UK as of the 30th September 2012 (not including contractors/freelancers, implants, or employees not on the payroll).*
* *Any major mergers, de-mergers or acquisitions must have been completed before 1st August 2012.*
2. Small Companies; Mid Companies; Big Companies; Special Awards
3. Small Companies: Shine Communications – Media; Mid Companies: UKRD Group Limited – Media;
Big Companies: Iceland Frozen Foods Ltd – Retail

Vocabulary record

Here, students should be encouraged to record all the new and useful vocabulary they have learned during the lesson, not only in the form presented in the article but also in related forms.

Related topics on onestopenglish

For follow-up lessons on the same or related topics go to the following lesson plans in the Business section on onestopenglish:

Business Spotlight: Out of office
http://www.onestopenglish.com/business/business-spotlight/out-of-office/551863.article

Business tasks: Contrast
http://www.onestopenglish.com/business/business-tasks/contrast/156632.article

We are not geeks

1 Warmer

Answer the questions below.

1. A geek is …

    a.   … a derogatory term for someone who is unqualified for the job they are doing.

    b.   … another word for someone who performs in a circus or cabaret.

    c.   … someone who is considered by many to be boring because they are very interested and/or knowledgeable in a particular subject.

2. What kind of jobs do you think geeks would enjoy doing / be suited to?

    _____   _____   _____

2 Key words and expressions

Write down the key words and expressions from the article that match the definitions below. The page numbers are given to help you.

Page 2

1. to be in charge of a person or group of people and to check that they are working correctly _____

2. the atmosphere in a large, possibly multi-national company (two words) _____ _____

3. not traditional or mainstream _____

4. a large room or building used for meetings, lectures or presentations _____

5. an informal word for table tennis _____

6. a large cloth bag that you sit on that is filled with small soft plastic balls _____

7. the actions of pressing, squeezing and rubbing someone's body in order to reduce pain in their muscles or to make them relax _____

Page 3

8. a drink for each of the people in a group _____

9. someone whose job is to officially examine the financial records of a company, organization or person to see that they are accurate _____

10. professional businesses that deal with the preparation of financial records _____

11. charts produced on a computer that show numbers in a way that makes them easy to compare _____

12. hiring someone to work in a company _____

13. unusual, unexpected or slightly strange _____

14. a system for organizing people according to their status in a company _____

③ Questions

Read the article and write the questions below onto the lines marked 1–6 so that the answers that follow them make sense. The questions are not in the correct order!
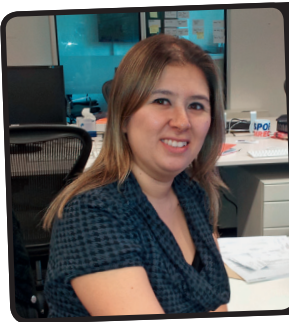
Would you want to change firms?

What about you?

What's it like working there?

How do you actually get any work done?

Where do you work?

What made you change?

We are not geeks
by Marley Obi

They work in very similar positions in the same city but their workplaces are completely different. MARLEY OBI listens to what two people have to say about their company culture.

"You'd look odd if you turned up to work here in a suit"

JANE WARWICK
group financial controller, Forward, London, United Kingdom

JANE WARWICK: Hello, Michael!

MICHAEL WHITESMAN: Hi, Jane! Nice to talk to you. (1) _____ _____

WARWICK: I work for Forward, an internet company that invests in web businesses and also does search marketing. It's a fairly small company, with 350 employees, and I supervise a team of ten finance staff. (2) _____ _____

WHITESMAN: I work for Network Rail, which runs the British rail infrastructure. It's a big organization, with about 35,000 employees. We are the ones who get blamed whenever a train is late!

WARWICK: (3) _____ _____

WHITESMAN: Well, it is quite a formal corporate environment. I work in a big open-plan office, with groups of six desks. It was obviously designed by someone who specializes in large corporate offices, because there's the standard white everywhere and large blocks of bright colours. What about you?

WARWICK: We're in Camden, which is very alternative, so there are lots of bars, clubs and market stalls, and the office itself is probably the most insane place I've ever worked in. In fact, it has been in The Sunday Times top 100 places to work. It has a kind of Alice-in-Wonderland look. There's a door shaped like a keyhole to get from one building to another and a red carpet in the middle. We have an open auditorium for guest speakers. There are tables for playing ping-pong, table football and pool, and a room with lots of beanbags and computer games, where people can go and just chill out. After having worked as an accountant for nine years in a corporate environment, I find it fantastic.

WHITESMAN: Wow! Our office is nothing like that! But we do have areas with comfortable chairs and that kind of thing. We can take our breaks there. And we get free coffee from the machine!

WARWICK: Well, we have a canteen, where you can get snacks, breakfast and hot and cold lunches. Croissants and muffins are freshly delivered every morning. There is also a fully stocked bar for Friday-night drinks. And it's all for free!

WHITESMAN: OK, you win! (4) _____ _____

WARWICK: Well, I don't stop work to go and play ping-pong! The accounts department is still rather traditional compared to the others, and we usually do the fun things after work. However, I do try and have a massage on Thursdays, as that only lasts 15 minutes, so it's easy to fit it around work. We have an office lottery for massages, which everyone joins, as there are only 60 massages offered a week. So, we sit there on Wednesday

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"People mostly think that accountants are all the same"

MICHAEL WHITESMAN senior financial analyst, Network Rail, London, United Kingdom

nights waiting for the email to come in, and you always know who has been lucky because you hear a cry of: "I've got one!". I manage to get one about every three weeks, and I love it. Actually, having all these opportunities can be a bit dangerous because it can make it hard to leave the office.

WHITESMAN: There's a very different atmosphere where I work, which is a serious place. My director sits opposite me, and everyone in the team is grouped around a senior person. People here really work hard to get ahead. So, there is quite a bit of pressure and I work fairly long hours. However, we do go out for drinks after work on a Friday, and the boss usually offers to buy the first round. You used to work in a corporate environment – (5) _____ _____ _____

WARWICK: Well, I trained as an auditor in one of the country's top 25 accountancy practices. It was a very traditional firm. After that, I worked for a firm in Soho, where our clients were like Forward, and I found I'm much more suited to this kind of fun environment.

WHITESMAN: It sounds like you're not the typical accountant. People mostly think that accountants are all the same, no matter where they work.

WARWICK: You mean geeks?

WHITESMAN: Well, accountants are seen as geeks, although I don't see myself as a geek and get frustrated when people refer to me as one. In my last job at the Ministry of Justice, I worked in the policy team and the policy people, who are about as creative as you can get

in this industry, regarded my colleagues and me as geeks because we were so clever with spreadsheets!

WARWICK: I don't see myself like that at all! In fact, when I am recruiting new accountants, I look for people who will fit into our fun environment. I see myself as fun-loving, not as a boring accountant in a suit.

WHITESMAN: Actually, I like wearing a suit. I think it gives you more authority.

WARWICK: Well, you'd look odd if you turned up to work here in a suit. In fact, people sometimes walk around the office with no shoes on! I think you can be more productive when you're feeling comfortable. I wore a suit for nine years and now I like not having to have separate work and weekend clothes.

WHITESMAN: Yes, I agree that's inconvenient, especially because suits are expensive. I hate having to spend hundreds of pounds on clothes I only wear to work.

WARWICK: What I also find frustrating in a traditional accounting firm are the many people needed to make decisions. Here, I meet my finance director each week. There is no hierarchy, no committee. I tell him what I want to change and he mostly says: "Let's do it!"

WHITESMAN: Yes, the slow decision-making in traditional firms can make you feel removed from the process – although things are faster at Network Rail.

WARWICK: (6) _____ _____

WHITESMAN: No, for me, more important than the work environment is finding the right job – one that fits best with my family and what I'm trying to do.

WARWICK: Well, it's been nice talking to you, Michael.

WHITESMAN: You too, Jane. Good luck!

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4 **Comprehension and content questions**

1. **Answer the questions with information from the article.**

a. How does Whitesman describe the design of his office?
b. How does Warwick's office differ in design?
c. What do they say about the availability of food and drinks at their places of work?
d. What other benefits do their companies offer them?
e. What (written or unwritten) dress codes are there at their offices?
f. What do they say about hierarchy and company structure?

2. **How would you talk about your place of work? Make notes and compare your company to the two in the article.**

Office design:

Availability of food and drinks:

Other benefits:

Dress code:

Hierarchy and company structure:

5 **Guided conversation**

Use the relevant questions from exercise 3 as the basis of a work-related chat with a partner. Talk also about the aspects mentioned in exercise 4 and ask more specific questions using some of the key words and expressions in exercise 2.

6 **Web task**

Find out more about The Sunday Times 'Best Companies to Work For' lists at
http://www.bestcompanies.co.uk/Index.aspx and answer the questions below.

1. What criteria must a company fulfil to be eligible?
2. Into which four sub-categories are the lists divided?
3. Which companies are top of the three main 2012 lists and which fields of business are they in?

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Vocabulary record: We are not geeks

verb	noun	adjective (+ opposite)	adverb (+ opposite)
invest			
	decision		
		boring	
			traditionally