



On your hobby horse

Ian McMaster

Back in the early 1980s, at the height of the »Troubles« in Northern Ireland, I visited a good friend in Belfast. One evening, I was talking to his father, a university lecturer, about his job. »Around here,« he said jokingly, »you don't ask colleagues what they do in their spare time.« At least, I think he was joking.

In the business world, talking about interests outside work is an important way of building relationships. And the ability to create rapport can be a key factor in business success. In general, we prefer working with people we like and with whom we have things in common.

But when making small talk, we don't ask normally people directly, »What are your hobbies?« or »What do you do in your leisure time?« Instead, we listen for signals and follow up with questions. So, if someone tells you they were in Scotland recently, you might ask, »Oh, did you go hiking?« Even if the answer is no, your partner may offer you a possible topic of mutual interest: »No, actually, we were in Glasgow, looking at the fantastic architecture, which is one of my hobbies«.

You should also offer business partners information about yourself and your interests so that they can follow up. For example: »I saw a wonderful film/play last night.« And if your partner asks you about an activity you are not interested in, don't just give a negative answer. Instead, offer an alternative, which may help you to find a common interest. So, if you hate football and are asked, »Did you see the game last night?«, you could reply, »No, to be honest, I'm not all

that interested in soccer. I much prefer tennis and athletics«.

When talking about activities or hobbies that you do regularly, use the simple present form – »I collect stamps/coins« not – unless you mean something you are doing just for a temporary period (»I'm running three times a week at the moment«). With many activities, particularly sports, we use the verb »go«: »I go jogging/swimming/hiking/skiing«. With other activities, we use the verb »do«: »I do yoga/pilates/t'ai chi/judo«.

When talking about activities that we like, we typically use the »-ing« form: »I like (or love) playing chess/listening to classical music/cooking«. But you can also use the »to« form (more typical in US English): »I like to climb mountains/watch French films/read thrillers«. On the other hand, the verb »enjoy« can normally be used only with the »-ing« form: »I enjoy travelling/singing in a choir/gardening«.

Experts disagree about whether hobbies and leisure interest should be listed on a curriculum vitae (US: résumé; **Lebenslauf**). Personally, I quite like to see two or three items listed, although they would never be decisive in the choice of candidate. To be safe, keep your list short.

A number of interesting terms relate to hobbies. A »hobbyist« is someone who pursues (**betreiben**) a particular activity, so you could say, »I'm a gardening hobbyist« or »she's a computer hobbyist«. Also, »hobby horse« (**Steckenpferd**) has two separate meanings, as in German: first, a child's toy made up of a horse's head on a stick; and second, some-

body's favourite topic or obsession (**Besses-senheit**). For example, if a colleague is always talking about how bad the weather is in Britain – not true, by the way – you could comment, »Oh, she's on/riding her hobby horse again«.

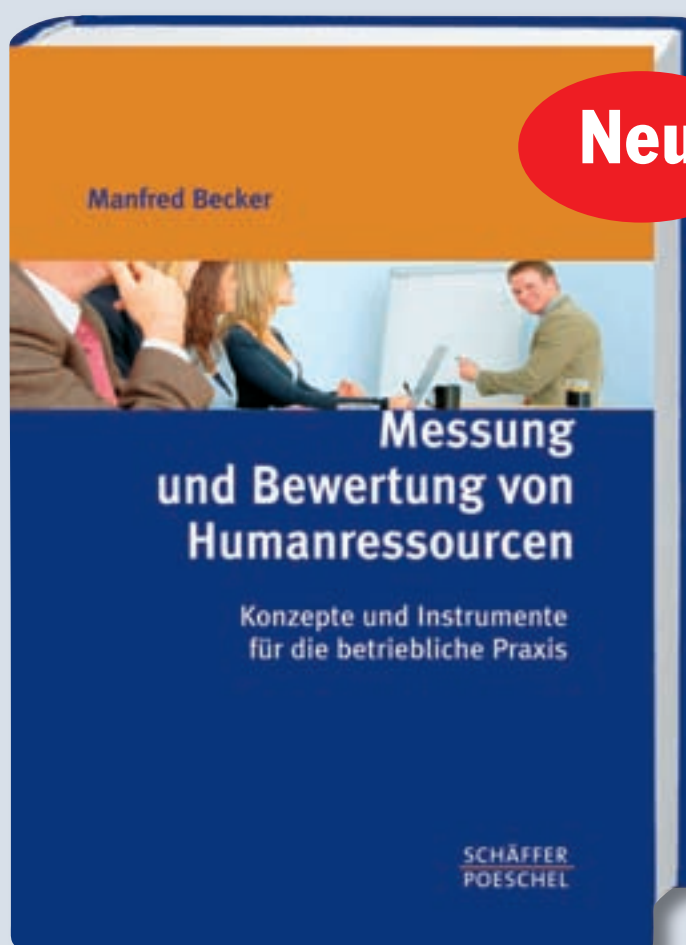
A more recent term is »anorak«, used to describe someone who has an obsessive – usually solitary – hobby or who goes into enormous detail on a particular subject. (»He's such an anorak: he keeps a list of every book he's read.«) The term comes from the waterproof clothing traditionally worn by trainspotters in Britain – people who stand at railway stations and write down the numbers of all the trains that pass through. So, if a friend is boring you with endless details of his new car or stamp collection, you could say, »Oh, stop being so anoraky!«



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