

Business Culture in the UK

Doing business in the UK may be different to what you have experienced in your home country. Here are some tips on what you may expect and how to respond.

How is it different?

In interviews with refugees who had set up businesses in the UK they identified these areas as leading to possible misunderstanding:

- Greetings and conversation
- Making appointments
- Meetings
- Written agreements
- Importance of facts
- Negotiation
- Personal information
- Giving gifts
- Employing family and friends
- Equality of opportunity

You may find other areas lead to misunderstanding, but the advice below should help give you a sense of business culture in the UK. Remember in any society not everyone follows exactly the same rules, therefore, you will need to decide what you think works best in a particular situation.

Greetings and conversation

Shaking hands is considered the polite way to greet someone you have just been introduced to and you will often hear people say “How do you do”, to which an appropriate reply is also “How do you do”. A less formal greeting is “How are you?” and the usual answer is “I’m fine, thank you. And you?”

Before discussing business matters, people usually make ‘small talk’ (have a short chat). This is often on a topic such as the weather, transport or sport. Humour is often used!

Making appointments

Usually:

- Meetings are normally arranged some days in advance.
- Meetings are within normal office working hours 09:00 am to 17:00 pm. Be aware the hour lunch break can be any time usually between 12:00 pm to 14:00 pm you will need to check if it is OK to meet during this time.

Sometimes it may be preferred:

- To have a working lunch (breakfast or dinner). Remember to be clear about who is paying!
- To meet in the evenings or at the weekend if the way the business works requires it.

Meetings

- Let the person you are meeting know if you are bringing somebody else with you, their name, role or interest in the issues.
- In the same way you can ask who else will be present.
- Punctuality is very important. If you are going to be late, phone the person you are meeting as soon as possible to let them know. Or, if you have to cancel the meeting, apologise and arrange a new time.
- Minutes or notes of the meeting are a good idea to remind you of the exchange of ideas or what was decided.

Written agreements

Of course situations vary, but verbal agreements do not guarantee something will happen.

It is generally a good idea to write down what you (your business partner or client) have agreed, and what each of you are committed to. You should all sign, date it and each keep a copy for your records.

There is a lot of paperwork used in business in the UK. Agreements are written down in the form of signed contracts or letters. These can be used in a court of law.

Importance of facts

You will have a better chance of being successful if the research into the need for your business is based on facts and figures from neutral sources. It will also help you convince others of your business idea. For example, presenting information gathered from doing some market research to an Enterprise Agency, such as interviewing potential customers in your area, will have more sway than talking over your idea with family and friends.

Negotiation

When negotiating a business agreement with a potential partner or client:

- Firstly understand the areas each of you needs to agree on.
- Do not be afraid to ask for an explanation on any point that is being made, or of the words used. It is important you both understand exactly what is being discussed.
- If you do not reach a way forward in the first meeting, but may need to agree to go away and think about ways around the problem and meet again.

Personal information

In the UK, many organisations and banks that support entrepreneurs often collect personal information to check your identity and credit rating. These organisations are not allowed to give your personal information to anyone else because your details are legally protected by the 'Data Protection Act'. You have a right to ask to see the

records of your personal information. (For more information on the Data Protection Act, 1998, go to www.ico.gov.uk.)

Be aware asking others about their personal information is a sensitive issue and can lead to difficulties. It is advised not to ask about personal information unless you need to for business (e.g. as an employer and see www.businesslink.gov.uk or ACAS, www.ecacas.co.uk for more on the types of information you should know about your employees) or if you know somebody well.

Giving gifts

There are rules and customs on giving business gifts in the UK, some formal, some informal. There is a basic law to ensure gifts cannot be given to persuade somebody to do something outside their normal job. Many businesses have a code of conduct to help their employees understand the law, for example:

- Employees should not accept business gifts, except items of very small value such as business diaries or calendars.
- Employees should not accept or give hospitality which other people might think could influence a business decision.
- Employees should record and report any gifts received or offers of hospitality made.

Businesses in the UK often send seasonal greeting cards to clients at Christmas. You do not have to be a Christian to send a card and it does not have to have a Christian message. It is a useful way to thank business clients and partners, and to maintain valuable business contacts.

Employing family and friends

Employing family and friends is common in the UK. You need to be aware that family and friends are covered by employment law.

For more information, Business Link has detailed information about employing family members and voluntary staff at www.businesslink.gov.uk.

Equality of opportunity

There are a number of laws that cover disability, gender, sexual orientation, race, religion and age to make sure every person has equal rights. Not only in employment, but also in the use of public services, treatment by others and in language used. Therefore you need to be aware of your rights as well as the rights of others.

For example:

- If your loan request is turned down by the bank it has to be for a business reason.
- Depending on the size of organisation and the resources it has, those who provide a service to the public have to make it as accessible as possible to disabled people.
- As an employer, you offer equal opportunities to all people.
- You are aware that with Leave to Remain you are entitled to work and contribute to the local economy and community.
- Be aware the language you or others use in conversation and correspondence is also covered in the above laws if it offends anyone.

For more information see www.acas.org.uk under Equality and Diversity explains all the latest laws on rights in the workplace.

Quiz

British business culture		Right?	Wrong?
1.	You can ask a British person about how much they earn in your first meeting	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.	If your bank manager says yes to a loan over the phone, the deal is completed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.	Times of meetings are only a guide, its does not matter if you turn up a bit late.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.	You will be able to get a loan on the basis that all your friends think your business will be a success.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.	You can give a potential client a business diary and a pen as a present and way to remind them of your business.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6.	Your husband/wife is helping you out in the early days of the business and you pay he/she the minimum wage to begin with.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7.	During your meeting you are embarrassed because you do not understand exactly what your client wants as he/she has used complicated language, you do not want to ask him/her what they meant as you are worried about showing you are not completely fluent. You decide to wait and see what happens.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.	At interview it becomes apparent that a job applicant is Hindu. Although the applicant has all the skills and competences required of the job, the organisation decides not to offer him the job because he is a Hindu.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9.	You can start a meeting by joking about the weather to put people at their ease.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10.	Meetings are ALWAYS formal. You have to work within office hours, take notes & agree formally to commitments and sign an official document.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Answers

1. Wrong. British people do not like to talk about how much they earn. They often see that as private.
2. Wrong. You cannot be sure you will get the money until you have received and signed the official loan agreement.
3. Wrong. It is really important to be punctual. If you are going to be late, try to telephone in advance to apologise and say when you expect to be there.
4. Wrong. Your friends' positive response to your idea may give an indication that it will succeed, but to get a loan you will need to show you have researched the idea properly.
5. Right. Diaries and pens are often given as a present to thank clients or partners, or as a way to promote your business.
6. Right. If you are paying your family as a paid employee, they have to be paid at least the minimum wage, just like other employees. They could volunteer for you and be paid nothing, but you would also have to make sure you followed the law on employing volunteers.
7. Wrong. Even if you feel your client will not be impressed, it is better to ask him exactly what he means as it could turn out much worse later on if you get things totally wrong. Most likely the client will not mind as at times business language, slang or sayings can be confusing.
8. Wrong. This is direct discrimination and illegal. The applicant can make a claim to an Employment Tribunal. It is not necessary for him or her to be employed by that business to make a claim of discrimination. (The only time this does not apply is when it is important to be of another faith to work for that organisation e.g. working for a Church or Mosque.)
9. Right. Mostly it is a good idea to put people at their ease. Of course this is not appropriate for every meeting (for instance in a disciplinary meeting!)
10. Wrong. Meetings can be formal, but they can also be informal, such as over dinner or a quick coffee. Taking notes on key points however is normally a good idea, as it helps you to remember key points.

Where to find out more

- 'Life in the United Kingdom – A Journey to British Citizenship' (Government - Home Office). Available from www.tsoshop.co.uk or book shops across the UK.
- The ACAS employment services – www.acas.co.uk has advice on laws, your rights and good practice in the workplace.
- CPID (Chartered Institute of Personnel Development) United Kingdom's leading professional body for those involved in the management and development of people www.cipd.co.uk
- 'Watching the English' by Kate Fox. Describes some hidden and unspoken rules of English behaviour. Available in book shops across the UK.
- Executive Planet has a guide to international business culture and etiquette. Find it at www.executiveplanet.com

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