



Culturewise – Focus on Netherlands

Internationally-minded, egalitarian and entrepreneurial, Dutch culture is characterised by openness and a genuine desire for co-existence between its diverse regional, religious and social components.

Dutch cultural characteristics are most obviously reflected in the day-to-day acceptance, open-mindedness and individualism that characterise Dutch society.

Less obviously perhaps they are apparent in the value the Dutch place on social order and conformism. In order for Dutch compromise and tolerance to work there has to be on respect for the laws, however few of them there are.

All of these Dutch characteristics rely on a shared desire for consensus and an occasionally conservative attitude towards change.

Dutch business culture both reflects and reinforces these core social attitudes. Customers and business contacts are certainly respected but giving the impression of superiority or making unreasonable or unfair demands is unlikely to be tolerated. Company communication lines are clear and direct and workplace relationships are marked by an egalitarian approach in which discussion and consensus-seeking are key elements of good work practice.

Tolerance, consensus and compromise

It was not until the 16th century that the part of northern Europe which now includes most of the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg became a distinct political entity. The original Dutch uprising against Spanish colonial rule resulted in the Republic of the Netherlands, comprised of seven semi-independent duchies and provinces. To get something done in this Republic and in the years that followed required that the various components that made up Dutch society combine to form coalitions of one sort or another. As the nation developed, so four distinct social coalitions appeared. Each of these coalitions, Catholic, Protestant, Socialist and liberal, had its own schools, newspapers, industries, and neighbourhoods. Individuals relied to a significant extent on their membership of these columns for identity and social support. Working effectively within coalitions then, as now, demanded consensus around goals and detailed planning. The ability to avoid causing unnecessary alienation of opponents, or to avoid standing out too much from mainstream opinion were basic survival skills. Success came through tolerance, the demonstration of respect for others, and a willingness to listen and compromise.

Today much of the Dutch cultural model is still based squarely on a collectivist desire not to impose one's point of view on others. The Dutch saying 'Doe maar gewoon, dan doe je al gek genoeg' roughly translatable as 'Just act normal, it's strange enough', neatly describes the cultural value attached to keeping one's head down, not standing out from the crowd, and not overdoing things. The freedom to do live life in an unconventional or sometimes even bizarre way, which is the stereotypical European image of the Netherlands, depends on the condition that individuals accept the pressure of social control and ultimately behave normally, particularly when it comes to showing tolerance and respect for others. It also has to be said that much of the Netherlands' social liberalism is marked as much by indifference to what others get up to, as it is by real tolerance.

As elsewhere in Europe the demands placed on the Dutch model by large scale immigration and the resulting ethnic and religious mix have led to something of a rethink on how society should work.

Nevertheless, the desire for consensus and compromise is to some extent hard-wired into the Dutch psyche and nowhere is this more apparent than in the business environment. Decision-making in Dutch organisations is to a greater extent than in almost any other European country guided by the need to reach and maintain consensus.

Calvinism and conformity

Calvinism was a particularly strict version of Protestant Christian faith that hugely influenced the development of Dutch culture from the 16th century onwards. The religion emphasises that all people are born equal but imperfect and prone to sin. An individual's task on earth is to scrutinise his or her own behaviour for signs of sin, and eradicate them as much as possible. As a practicing religion Calvinism has limited influence in the modern Netherlands, one of Europe's most secular nations. Nevertheless its core values linger on in Dutch culture in an attachment to soul-searching, self-criticism and egalitarianism. A strong work ethic, moderation, a belief in orderliness, and a desire not to appear boastful and to just act normal can all be traced to the influence of Calvinism.

The Dutch education system continues to reinforce these values. Children are taught to be assertive and make their own choices but also to co-operate and compromise with others. In the Dutch work environment one influence of Calvinism is the strong attachment to honesty, clarity and straightforwardness as an essential element of effective professional communication.

For overseas business visitors, particularly those from Anglo-Saxon cultures, this communication style can sometimes come across as overly direct or even blunt. In business discussions the Dutch can be significantly more inclined to express direct criticism, whether of themselves or others, than is the case elsewhere. Business visitors can best view this critical approach as a sign of interest and involvement in the issues at hand, rather than any desire to be discourteous. Criticism that appears blunt or even rude is usually designed to be helpful.

Overleg and Beleid

The Dutch word Overleg, roughly translated as deliberation, describes an occasionally lengthy process by which groups work towards reaching a compromise decision, whether in business or elsewhere. Overleg strongly influences the way in which information is exchanged and discussions take place. The word Beleid describes the stated policy or aims of a company or organisation and the activities the organisation undertakes to achieve policy goals. Beleid comes into being through the process of Overleg and serves to make business processes and goals explicit and unambiguous for everyone in the company. Every individual within the company has to act within the agreed Beleid.

At its best the behaviours associated with Overleg and Beleid carry the implication that everyone should be listened to, and that the end result of discussion should be shared consensus. At its worse, worse Overleg has been associated with a meeting culture unrivalled anywhere else in Europe, in which long and sometimes fierce debate is too easily seen as a method for regulating process, or a solution in itself, rather than a means to an end.

Business Etiquette & Protocol in the Netherlands

Relationship-building:

- Establishing close personal relationships with Dutch business contacts is not as important elsewhere in Europe. Instead the focus tends to be on dealing professionally with the issues at hand in a clear and transparent manner. That said the Dutch value a personal approach and business socialising take place on a regular basis.
- Business cards are commonly exchanged. As a high-level of competence in English is widespread through the Netherlands it is not necessary to have business cards translated. Promotional materials, manuals and standard contracts should be translated into Dutch wherever possible, particularly when dealing with complex or unusual terms.

Communication styles:

- Dutch communication styles tend to be direct, clear and unambiguous, and the ability to read between the lines may not be as well developed as elsewhere. As a consequence business people from countries with a less direct style, such as the UK, may need to be more explicit when communicating, particularly when giving feedback or constructive criticism.

- It is also important not to misinterpret forcefully expressed ideas as discourteous or confrontational. Instead, the Dutch tendency to ask challenging questions in a direct manner can productively be seen in two ways. Firstly as an integral underpinning of their willingness to innovate or experiment in business, and secondly as a way of avoiding unwelcome secrets in the work environment.
- Dutch companies are renowned for giving out more information to staff and customers than would be considered appropriate elsewhere. Any hesitance in answering questions in a clear and straightforward way can be seen by Dutch business contacts as unwillingness to share relevant information.

Meetings:

- Business interactions tend, at least initially, to be somewhat more formal than those in Anglo-Saxon cultures.
- Greetings are similar to those encountered elsewhere in Western Europe. Handshakes are common at the beginning and end of meetings and between men and women.
- Maintaining good eye-contact is important, although strong smiles are not common in business in formal business settings and tend to be reserved for close family and friends.
- When addressing unfamiliar business contacts it is probably sensible to use titles (Mr or Mijnheer for a man, Mrs, Ms or Mevrouw for a woman) followed by a last name, until it is clear you can use first names.
- Older people or those outside the more cosmopolitan and urban parts of the country may take longer to feel comfortable with the use of first names.
- Professional titles such as lawyer, doctor or engineer are hardly ever used when speaking although are commonly used in business correspondence.
- Business letters can usually be written in English and should maintain a formal tone, even if you are on first name terms with the recipient.
- In a country as task-focussed as the Netherlands hard facts, figures, and empirical data will always be more persuasive than personal intuition or unsupported supposition.
- However, the tone in which data is presented can be of vital importance in maximising the persuasiveness of business arguments. In particular business-people should take care not to present information in a way that comes across as overstated, inflated or conceited. The best sales presentations are simple, factual and understated, and let the data speak.

- Supporting documentation needs to be clear and concise and written in simple low key language. Words that even hint at showing off or boasting about company achievements, product superiority or individual expertise can create the wrong impression, even if what is being said is fundamentally true.

Negotiations:

- Generally speaking the Dutch will rarely spend a lot of time socialising before a negotiation or meeting. Once the necessary introductions are made they will tend to move directly to the business at hand. In negotiations it is important to avoid over-promising or ambiguity in responding to specific requests. Tentative answers such as ‘we’ll see’, ‘it might be possible’ or ‘perhaps’, sound evasive and unconvincing, and lack clarity. Saying no when you mean no is likely to come across to Dutch contacts as more honest and straightforward, and ultimately more beneficial for long-term business relationships.
- Promises need to be kept, no matter how casual or inconsequential they may appear. Changing or revisiting an agreement after it has been confirmed is unlikely to endear you to Dutch contacts.
- Business visitors from cultures that value quick decision-making may also need to think carefully about how speedily they can conclude negotiations in the Netherlands. The importance attached to consensus in companies means that decisions may take longer to emerge than elsewhere. This can be frustrating on occasion but it is sensible for visitors to focus on the positive benefits of this process. Most of the key people will already have been consulted before a decision is finalised, which at least in theory removes the need to sell a decision to a potentially sceptical team. Follow through also tends to be quicker once a deal is established, as many of the key planning details have already emerged, and commitments agreed, as part of the decision-making process.

Socialising:

- Businesses lunches, and to a lesser extent dinners, take place on a regular basis and serve as forums for continuing business discussions. Social events tend to be scheduled and planned in advance and it may be difficult for business contacts to respond positively to last minute invitations.

- The most successful social occasions tend to be those that fit in with the Dutch and Belgian concept of gezelligheid. Roughly translatable as cosy or pleasant, gezelligheid implies that the best social occasions are low-key, with the main focus on a comfortable mood, good food and drink and the enjoyment of good company. Choosing to entertain business contacts in obviously expensive and ostentatious restaurants carries the risk of appearing immodest, or even boastful. Carefully selecting an attractive gezelligheid location with an obviously relaxing and even subdued atmosphere will reduce this risk. Most restaurants include gratuities in the bill and tipping ostentatiously is also likely to be viewed as immodest.
- Flowers, chocolates, houseplants, or thoughtfully selected and reasonably-priced wine are all acceptable gifts if invited for dinner at a Dutch home. Otherwise gift-giving does not form an important part of Dutch business culture. If you do wish to give a gift, it is probably sensible to do so to celebrate a successful contract rather than at the outset of any relationship. The best gifts are carefully selected but manifestly modest. Expensive gifts can cause embarrassment and may be interpreted as inappropriate

Dress:

- Business dress in the Netherlands tends to be fairly conservative, although this depends to a certain extent on the business sector and age of counterparts. In the more traditional sectors men wear dark suits, with shirt and tie, while women wear suits, or skirts and white blouses. Many successful Dutch entrepreneurs, particularly in newer business sectors, make significant efforts to dress down.
- Wearing obviously expensive labels in any work environment can come across as boastful and possibly even pretentious. When in doubt about appropriate dress it makes sense to ask local colleagues and remain on the conservative side.
- Business hours and appointments:
- Planning, managing, and organising are key values in Dutch culture and significant value is attached to the efficient and productive use of time. Punctuality is essential for both business and social engagements. Appointments are carefully scheduled and there may be considerable resistance to last minute changes to appointments, schedules or deadlines.
- Office hours are generally 8.30am to 5.30pm, although senior staff will work longer. Appointments can be difficult to arrange during the summer holiday period in July and August, and over the Christmas period in late December.

Taboos:

- Unsurprisingly in such an open culture there are few taboo subjects in conversations with Dutch contacts. Religion is seen as a private issue and is probably best avoided. Otherwise, robust discussion is welcome on most subjects including recent political events.