

Background Briefing on UK Culture and Business-Culture



A free WHITE paper from Culturewise's training team

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UK Culture and Business Culture

Cultural differences do not, in themselves, make life difficult for people living and working across cultural boundaries. On the contrary, developing an understanding of different assumptions, expectations and ways of doing things can be an extremely enriching personal and professional experience.

However, cultural differences can cause difficulty in business when we are ignorant of the fact that other people think and work in different ways, or we interpret other people's behaviour based on out-of-date and restrictive stereotypes

Business visitors to the UK may well need to set aside more than a few stereotypes in order to do business effectively with the country's hugely diverse workforce.

For example, modern Britain is no more class-bound than any other society in contemporary Europe or North America, and the British are some of the least 'cold' or standoffish people to do business with in the world. Surprised? Culturewise's culture course on 'Working with the UK' looks in depth at UK culture and business culture and explores how to work effectively in the UK business environment.

This white-paper looks in depth at some of the issues covered in 'Working with the UK' culture courses provided by Culturewise. For more information on tailoring the course for your organisation or team, please call us on +44 (0) 20 7387 5521.

The British Identity

The national identity of the inhabitants of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is a complex issue, perhaps as much to the British themselves as anyone else. Until the 19th century the term 'British' did not exist: the inhabitants of Great Britain and Ireland were English, Scottish, Welsh or Irish. It was only with the beginning of a powerful empire that the concept of being 'British' came into common use. With the end of empire and relative loss of British political, economic and social influence, it might have been expected that the concept of being 'British' would fade away. In fact, despite the recent extensive devolution of power from the centre to the UK's constituent nations, the results of the recent Scottish Independence referendum suggest there are as yet few overwhelming political or economic forces pulling the United Kingdom apart. There is certainly no great desire for political change to involve closer ties with the European continent.

Nevertheless it is important for business visitors to the UK to remember that many people who live in the country think of themselves primarily as Scottish, Welsh, Irish, English, or as a member of an ethnic minority, rather than as British. It is particularly important not to assume that the people of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland share the same cultural identity as the English. Addressing Scottish people as 'English' in business meetings is, in particular, likely to invite a robust response.

Equally important is the need to recognise the huge cultural diversity of the UK. In the country as a whole around 12.5% of the resident population was born overseas, with the figure rising to an astonishing 37% of central London residents. These figures do not include second generation ethnic minority inhabitants who were born in the UK, or the many new overseas immigrants the UK government estimates arrives each and every day.

Bearing in mind the multi-cultural and multi-national nature of British society the question arises as to whether it makes sense to talk of a shared 'British' culture at all. In fact, there remain a range of beliefs and values that the majority of people who live in the UK would recognise as being traditionally British, even if there is an equal recognition that not every UK resident necessarily shares them. The British are as individual and unique as residents of any other nationality. The following comments on British culture are therefore generalisations only. They may help paint a picture of some of the influences on the people business visitors will come into contact with, but will not necessarily hold true for every person you meet.

Britain and class

Britain has long been held to be an example of a society divided by class rather than by the language or ethnicity. In reality this image of Britain is something of an anachronism. While the stereotype of a class-obsessed Englishman might once have had a basis in reality much has changed over the last 50 years, particular since the Thatcher revolution of the 1980's. In particular there has been a wholesale rejection of the attitudes of extreme deference to those of senior 'rank' that was once a hallmark of the British social experience.

Thus, modern Britain is no more class-bound than any other society in contemporary Europe or North America. This is not, however, to say that British attitudes to social class are the same as elsewhere. In fact, class continues to be internalised in the UK to a greater extent than in almost any other advanced society. Class distinctions in Britain continue to revolve around things on the inside such as the way you speak, the books you choose to read, or the way you hold your knife and fork, rather than things on the outside such as the money you earn or your job title. This means British people themselves are often capable of detecting nuances of accent, manner and dress of which foreign visitors are likely to be completely unaware. It is this often unconscious tendency amongst the British to categorise others based on internal rather than external factors that has led to many of the stereotypes of the British as 'class-obsessed'.

Paradoxically perhaps, the fact that social class is so internalised in Britain makes it less important for the British to use formal forms of address in business. Although interaction may be somewhat more formal outside London, first names are commonly used in most businesses from first acquaintance and the British can find the use of formal titles and forms of address (i.e. Mr, Herr Doktor, Monsieur, etc) in the work environment both surprising and uncomfortable. Professional titles are rarely used in conversation with the exception of doctors or religious figures.

The 'cold' British

The British have a wholly unjustified cultural stereotype as being cold or standoffish. In fact there is nothing innately distant about the British, although tolerance for others is a core cultural value. In public the British tradition of tolerance is most visible in a relatively consensual approach to the imposition of political control and a longstanding absence of political extremism. In private it surfaces most often in a shared belief in 'leaving other people alone' and avoiding conflict. For the British 'leaving people alone' often means not making potentially controversial statements in public, not imposing beliefs or unwelcome attention on someone, not invading personal space, and not assuming that people have any desire to initiate a conversation on bus or train with someone they do not know. In reality, providing they feel that everyone's individual boundaries are being respected the British are as friendly and outgoing as anyone else on the planet.

The desire to leave people alone and avoid conflict also usefully explains why many British people use a somewhat more indirect communication style than European and North American neighbours. One characteristic of this indirect style is the variety of communication techniques the British use to express complex messages, particularly those that can be seen as overtly confrontational. In particular humour and joke-telling contain a complex range of functions above and beyond making people laugh. These include diffusing tension, particularly in difficult or confrontational situations; speeding up discussion; making criticisms; showing disagreement; showing disappointment and introducing new ideas. Of course, the British can, when required, be as unambiguous as any other nationality (as anyone watching exchanges in the British parliament can testify). However this type of directness tends to be delivered within the fairly formalised parameters of courteous 'debate', or relies on the ability of counterparts to read between the lines of some fairly ambiguous messages. If business visitors find their British contacts being very direct, sometimes to the point of rudeness, this is probably because the British feel they are communicating within the parameters of a 'debate', or their counterparts have failed to 'read between the lines' and as a result backed them into a corner.

The British also often do not feel the need to communicate explicitly a 'corporate' way of doing things. US-style socialisation into company values can sometimes be seen as manipulative, or even as intrusion into what should be private and personal spheres of life.

British non-verbal communication is similar to other European countries, although there is typically less direct eye contact than France or Germany. Handshakes are standard when meeting people for the first time or at the beginning and end of periodic business meetings, but are not used with close colleagues or friends. The British find the French tendency to shake hands with colleagues every morning quite strange.

The British and authority

The British have a somewhat hesitant attitude towards what they perceive as the imposition of authority. In many British companies not only is there no automatic respect for bosses and high-achievers, there is often some irreverence shown towards those in senior positions. Labelled the "Tall Poppy Syndrome", this irreverence can be characterised as ambivalence towards anyone considered to be over-achieving or with too much ambition. Thus, in place of the 'tough' American manager, the 'elitist' French manager or the 'technocratic' German manager, the British manager tends to be chosen for his or her 'soft skills'. In this case, soft skills can be defined as the ability to communicate effectively and persuasively and gain the consent of colleagues and subordinates to important decisions.

Business visitors from some cultures may find it hard to match this view of the British as anti-authoritarian, with what they view as a national tendency to conformism. In fact in the UK conformity, like class, is often internalised. Rules, written or unwritten, tend to be obeyed without the need for too much external control. As a result excessive systematisation and the imposition of decisions without sufficient consultation will damage business visitors in the eyes of British contacts. As the UK workforce is characterised by high mobility, both nationally and internationally, employees tend to take a relatively short-term view of employment. Intense loyalty to an employer is rarely part of British culture and British employees are likely to change jobs rapidly if they feel insufficiently involved in decision-making. Achieving consensus, avoiding disharmony and not being seen to 'impose' decisions in an obviously authoritarian way remain important elements of what the British perceive as 'good management'.

It is, however, important for Business visitors to remember that the British need for consultation is rarely demonstrated in the kind of formalised consensus-seeking systems common in Scandinavian, German or

Dutch companies. Nor, in the private sector at least, does it usually include the kind of formal Trade Union involvement common elsewhere. Trade Unions in general have little influence outside the public sector. Instead, British consensus-seeking is likely to be reflected in the tendency for decision-making to be guided by unwritten rules and traditions. Providing you are following these unwritten rules and colleagues are consulted on important issues you can assume they have agreed unless specific objections are raised.

British Individualism

While the British value consensus and not 'rocking the boat', this does not mean that they are not individualistic. However, the British concept of individuality is very different from the self-reliance and self-belief common the United States, or the 'egocentricity' of some Latin cultures. Instead it can be distinguished in two closely related themes: eccentricity and tolerance for ambiguity.

Eccentricity is usually reflected in a simple desire to appear different from others, whether in clothing, gardening, hair-style or musical tastes. There may also be something of a disdain for 'slavish' following of fashion or social trends. In the work environment eccentricity appears as a form of institutionalised 'rule-breaking'. Manifested in the right situations, eccentricity is often highly valued in organisations and teams. In smaller businesses in particular there may sometimes be considerable leeway given to eccentric or deviant behaviour when exhibited by individuals seen as gifted or innovative, providing this eccentricity is expressed in a lawful, polite and constructive way.

A parallel element to British individualism is a dislike of too much externally imposed structure. This dislike is often expressed in an aversion to working within a framework that is perceived as being overly systematised or inflexible, together with a profound distrust of what can be perceived as 'over-intellectualisation' in any sphere of life. Unfortunately, to individuals from more structured cultures, the value the British place on 'flexibility' can sometimes come across as a lack of perfectionism. British time-scales can be notoriously short-term and the British may still often seem to aim for the expedient rather than the innovative solution to a problem.

The education system

The English education system has for much of the past century focused less on imparting specific knowledge and more on developing evaluation and communication skills. Although this approach to education has proven well suited to permitting the brightest and best to push back the boundaries of science and technology, one of its many drawbacks is that it has left many British people with less highly developed vocational skills than is common in other developed countries. This is made worse by the fact that arts subjects, such as English or History, have traditionally been ascribed much greater educational and social status than scientific or practical subjects. Foreign business visitors may be surprised at the extent to which British organisations are required to provide basic professional and skills training to workforces. Many British managers, particularly at the junior or middle levels, are also less well-trained than elsewhere.

British education has become much more vocational in the last few years. However the British education system's preference for arts over sciences and 'thinking' over vocational skills remains. Half of all graduate job opportunities in British newspapers are open to graduates of any discipline and the promotion to top-level posts of 'gifted amateurs' continues to this day. Qualifications higher than degree level, unless vocational, can sometimes make employers nervous that the candidates in question are too

‘academic’ and not ‘practical’ enough. Of course, this British education system does have benefits. Employees often have a highly flexible and pragmatic approach to work roles. Mobility across several job functions and businesses is encouraged and acquiring a broad range of skills is considered helpful. British managers may be less well trained, but they are likely to have a wider breadth of experience and generalist knowledge than found in some other countries.

Building relationships in the UK

Business visitors to the UK, particularly to London, should anticipate encountering a very diverse workforce. As a result sensitivity to the background and heritage of the people you deal with is important in building effective business relationships. While the kind of positive discrimination seen in the USA is not generally part of British business culture, equal opportunity and anti-discrimination laws are both strict and rigorously enforced. Business visitors would benefit from finding out what their legal responsibilities are in this area before they start doing business. Failing to respect the law in this area can cost a great deal of money.

Once you have thought about exactly who you will be dealing with in the UK, it is useful to reflect a little on your own attitudes towards relationship-building. Broadly speaking, forming strong personal relationships with business contacts is likely to be more important in the UK than in North America, but less so than Latin and Asian cultures. For the British trust is rarely assumed up front at the beginning of a business relationship as it might be elsewhere. Instead it is built through demonstrating humour, flexibility and a concern for following through on commitments.

The UK is not a particularly food-oriented although the quality of British restaurants has seen something of a transformation over the past two decades. For most British employees lunch often consists of little more than a sandwich eaten while browsing the internet at one’s desk. While business lunches with clients and suppliers are fairly common, many British people find the extensive networking opportunities associated with frequent business lunches in continental Europe and elsewhere confusing and unfamiliar. Instead spending time in the pub with colleagues provides the British with their opportunities for informal networking and is generally seen to benefit career progression. While the British consume on average less alcohol per annum than do the inhabitants of many European countries, they do tend to consume larger quantities at any one time: so called ‘binge-drinking’. The British also tend not to eat in pubs (unlike in the ‘Café cultures of continental Europe) leading to unfortunate stereotype of the ‘drunk Englishman’ common among European neighbours. Lunch is generally taken between noon and 2pm, with dinner between around 7pm and 10pm. Alcohol is sometimes consumed during business lunches, although there is certainly no obligation to do so and many companies frown on the practice.

As elsewhere, it is probably sensible for female business people to issue lunch rather than dinner invitations to male contacts. It also makes sense to invite at the same professional level to lunch unless entertaining the whole team. There are no particular rules about when business can be discussed at lunch but lunch, but during coffee seems a sensible time. Business cards are not generally seen as a sign of ‘status’ and may or may not be handed out, depending on the circumstances. As a result do not necessarily anticipate receiving cards even from those to whom you have given a card. Gifts are rarely part of doing business in the UK.

Making the right impression

Check with your business contacts as regards to appropriate business dress. If in doubt conservative dress is the norm for both men and women. Darker colours such as black or dark blue tend to be most common.

There are few taboos in conversations with the British, however as elsewhere insensitive comments about contentious political issues are likely to cause some embarrassment. Britain has a well-deserved reputation as a tolerant country with a long history of religious, political and social freedoms. However immigration and its impact remains a highly sensitive political issue and recent terrorist incidents have put in question the degree of success with which the country has handled the move to multiculturalism. Tread carefully with comments in these areas. Comments about the quality of British food are likely to invite a somewhat weary response. Negative comments about the Royal Family are more likely to invite a yawn than any sense of insult.

Communicating effectively with British contacts is mainly a matter of common sense. Firstly, look out for vague suggestions that are really requests. “Perhaps you might like to think about changing the structure of your proposal” is definitely more of an instruction than a suggestion in British English.

Secondly, listen carefully and do not mistake ambiguity or vagueness for disinterest. The British are generally much happier to confront when they feel that there are others who share their opinions. If they feel they are the only ones who object to an idea or suggestion they may not necessarily say anything so as to avoid ‘rocking the boat’. Consequently look for covert signs of dissent. Qualifications, vagueness, understatement and humour can all signal polite disagreement with what you are saying. Silence in a conversation does not necessarily mean agreement or that individuals have bought into your ideas. Negative feedback is also more likely to be veiled or couched in humour in the UK than elsewhere.

Thirdly, learn to recognise when the British fall into debate mode and develop your own debating skills. When invited to comment directly and explicitly on proposals the British assume that the rules of ‘debate’ will apply and normal ‘indirectness’ can be set aside. Debate means challenging the ideas put forth by each other, clients, suppliers or superiors directly and bluntly. This is rarely meant to be personally challenging to others but is simply part of the rules. Lucidity and the ability to be entertaining are also important foundations of good debate and the British will respect business visitors who can argue their cases coherently and with humour.

Next, hone your skills at reading between the lines. Keep in mind that the British are taught from a young age to ‘read between the lines’ and draw their own conclusions. British employees often comment that foreign PowerPoint presentations (by Americans in particular) are exasperating because everything is spelled out, even when the meaning is perfectly clear and obvious. Consider adapting your presentation styles to avoid being too explicit and obvious about the conclusions your audience is meant to take away. Be aware also that presentations with clear conclusions but insufficient detail or data may be rejected as too much like marketing; too slick and superficial.

Next, if you are unclear about what your counterparts are trying to say, then ask them to clarify their comments. The British will generally be direct when you ask them to do so and may well be completely unaware if you are finding them difficult to follow. Similarly, if your British contacts ask for explicit and direct feedback, give it to them. The British often perceive the ‘hamburger’ approach to negative feedback (surrounding the criticism with the soft stuff) as insincere. If you are asked for clarity, be clear.

Finally, be yourself. Time spent on small talk before approaching business issues is time invested, not wasted (although the British can recognise insincerity as quickly as anyone else). Showing a genuine desire to listen, and a polite but friendly demeanour, will make the right impression. Maintain eye

contact when emphasising important points but try to avoid being seen as 'aggressive'. Avoid gestures such as backslapping and hugging unless you know your contacts well.

Persuading and influencing

The presence of extensive unwritten rules and a comparative lack of formalised structures in many British businesses can be confusing for business visitors. Inevitably, it means that a wider range of people are likely to be involved in decision-making than elsewhere, and it may even be difficult to work out who actually has ultimate responsibility for decision-making. Once you have found out who needs to be influenced the following general suggestions are likely to help you get the results you want.

Firstly, be open. Transparency is an important element of work culture and having access to information is not considered a source of power as it is in some other business cultures. Information tends to be shared with anyone inside the organisation and copying large numbers of people in on emails is viewed as polite, or even as a way of protecting one's own interests.

Secondly, be 'reasonable'. The British are fundamentally data driven and business decisions will ultimately be based on logic and facts. Demanding on-the-spot decisions based on intuition or hunches can appear unreasonable. This is not to suggest that the British are particularly resistant to change. In fact, the British reputation as being attached to tradition can be most productively understood as looking to what the past can teach us about the present, rather than a fear of the new and unknown. Rather than pushing for instant decisions give your British contacts sufficient time for a response, and make space for them to fall into 'debate' mode where necessary.

Thirdly, avoid the hard sell. The British can sometimes perceive as 'boastful' and 'arrogant' what others view as fair representations of the truth and there is a particular aversion to those who promise things that cannot be delivered. Keep in mind that effective arguments are those which avoid exaggeration or over-simplification. The best sales approach is heavy on data and explicitly tailored to the specific needs of the potential customer. If on occasion the British sometimes appear to ask 'naïve' questions, this is best understood as their way of gaining a broader perspective on the issue in question. For the most part British contacts do not necessarily see the need for expert knowledge as a pre-requisite for contributing to a discussion.

Dealing with hierarchies

Top managements' role in the UK is generally to identify business opportunities and persuade others in the organisation to pursue them. Similarly, British middle managers also often see their role as coordinators through persuasion and negotiation rather than controllers. Whatever their role, the need for British leaders and managers to possess 'soft' skills is always emphasised and the British are often inclined to see as 'interpersonal' issues those types of problems that other cultures might put down to lack of role clarity or structure. Business visitors dealing with UK hierarchies will therefore benefit from well-developed persuasion and negotiation skills and the ability to communicate a strategic view persuasively.

As elsewhere, female employees dominate in sales and administrative posts however enormous strides have been made in recent years to expand opportunities, with 31% of middle-management posts held by women. Business visitors should anticipate finding female colleagues, clients and suppliers at senior levels in all segments of the economy.

Managing people

Many British employees consider it is more important to know what has to be done than who has the power to do it, and the burden of coordinating functions often relies on individual managers rather than centralised, structured, or formalised decision making processes. Consequently British employees are much more likely to respond to managers who demonstrate consideration, support and concern, rather than obvious drive and ambition or an overly process-focused approach. Management 'tough-talk' is unlikely to be welcomed and instead a sense of inclusiveness and humour is likely to get things done. The British are natural team-workers who perform best in relatively unstructured, free-thinking environments where there are opportunities for creativity and challenge. Building in opportunities for participation in the planning process is likely to result in less need to 'sell' management decisions once they have been taken.

Meetings are often informal and consensus even if only passive is important if individuals are to buy into a decision. Personnel changes are rarely political and are usually about accommodating the available talent and creating opportunities for personal development.

Managing time, schedules, deadlines and bureaucracy

Normal working hours are from around 9 to 5 Monday to Friday. Many people work much longer although the UK is not a long-hours culture to the same extent as the USA or Japan. It is easiest to arrange appointments mid-morning or mid-afternoon. Punctuality is expected and appreciated although in London problems with traffic and the transport infrastructure create a certain amount of acceptance over minor lateness.

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