

Cultural differences

Cultural differences in the workplace and how to navigate them to improve communication and collaboration.

Understanding what characterizes a workplace is the key to successful intercultural communication which facilitates seamless and trouble-free communication within multinational teams.



Summary and comparison of workplace characteristics in:

USA

Time is money mentality + "Can do" mentality

Liberty and justice for everyone

Driven by success and achievements

Progressive

India

Emphasis on unity in diversity.

Strong work ethic

Relationship-oriented - concept of Karma

Importance of religion in culture (influences both verbal and non-verbal communication)

Germany

Pragmatic

Employee comfort and security (work council, trade unions, employee's ass.)

Perfectionist

Professionalism

Czech Republic

Conservative

Hierarchical

Non-confrontational

USA

**"I'm American, I'm used to being worked to death."
female, 31y., cybersecurity, relationship-oriented**

Americans are renowned for their "time-is-money" and "can-do" attitudes, which are deeply ingrained in their character. These mindsets fuel their drive and motivation, propelling them towards the pursuit of success and accomplishment that are highly valued in American society. However, their forward-thinking workplaces and attitudes, particularly concerning equality and equity, set them apart as progressive leaders in the global community.

But what exactly does that mean in intercultural communication?

Verbal communication

Americans are known for their direct and transparent communication – YES means YES, and NO means NO.

Some enjoy the silence, but Americans are uncomfortable in it and will try to fill it – their favourite way of doing so is small talk.



So, what do you even talk about in small talk? You can't go wrong with these:

Sports

Weather

Food

News

Hobbies

But please, avoid the following at all costs:

Wage

Religion

Death

Age

Looks

To maintain neutrality and avoid any potential controversy, it's best to steer clear of politics and controversial topics altogether. It's worth noting that Americans are passionate about a wide range of causes and issues, so it's important to approach any controversial topic with sensitivity and respect.

In the United States, work environments tend to have a casual and informal atmosphere. While a handshake may be customary during introductions, it is not uncommon for colleagues, including superiors, to be addressed by their first names afterwards. While constructive criticism is essential for any organization's growth, it is advisable to exercise discretion and tact when communicating it to your superiors. Directly and publicly criticizing your superiors can be perceived as a disrespectful attempt to undermine their authority.

Non-verbal communication



In American workplaces, people are generally relaxed and informal, and this extends to their non-verbal communication as well.

Americans tend to smile a lot, and their body language is relaxed and open, they seem approachable.

Dress codes are typically not enforced and casual attire is prevalent, especially in tech companies and startups. In some more conservative workplaces, like finance, the dress code may be stricter.

Firm handshakes with good eye contact are customary when meeting somebody for the first time.

Meetings



Meetings in American workplaces are frequent – they occur on a weekly, monthly, and even every year – you can expect to talk about your work progress, have evaluations and feedback, and fill in questionnaires among other things related to the company’s policy.

These meetings will follow the agenda closely, you’re also expected to arrive on time as punctuality is extremely important.

You’re expected to be proactive and take an active part in discussions, if you remain silent, it may be perceived as if you were uninterested.

Being on your phone, or otherwise distracted, is extremely rude and taboo.

Among other taboos in American society we can include:

Gossiping in the office, not responding to e-mails in a timely way, running late or missing meetings, not crediting others when appropriate, and criticizing others.

Hofstede insights largest value

On Hofstede Insights, the leading cultural analytics online tool, Americans have scored the highest on the “Individualism” and “Indulgence” scales.

- Americans are accustomed to doing business or interacting with people they don’t know well.
- Consequently, Americans are not shy about approaching their prospective counterparts to obtain or seek information.
- In business, employees are expected to be self-reliant and show initiative. Also, within the exchange-based world of work, we see that hiring.

- Promotions and decisions are based on merit or evidence of what one has done or can do.
- The American premise of “liberty and justice for all.” This is evidenced by an explicit emphasis on equal rights in all aspects of American society and government.
- Hierarchy is established for convenience, superiors are accessible and managers rely on individual employees and teams for their expertise.

Indulgence

Work hard

India

“Business relationships are of the utmost importance. Indians will base their decisions on trust and intuition as much as on statistics and data, so be mindful of the importance of a good working relationship.”

In India, business relationships are of the utmost importance. Indians will base their decisions on trust and intuition as much as on statistics and data. Take the time to engage in small talk and get to know your prospective partner. Rushing straight into the business issue could be perceived as rudeness. People are valued for their titles and seniority – It’s important to show respect at all times. Learning and understanding the culture and religion is also crucial because it is part of nearly every workplace. The work ethic is strong in India, so be careful what you ask for – your Indian colleague will help you, even if it means working through the weekend. It is extremely important to be mindful of interactions with someone of the opposite sex.



Verbal communication



Indians have difficulties with saying no because that may be offensive. Instead, they will opt for saying “We’ll see”, or “I will try”. It is not advisable to compel your colleague to be more direct or pressure them. Sometimes, they’d rather remain silent, than say no.

Since Indian businesses are often very hierarchically structured, it is important to place importance on and to use formal titles – when meeting a doctor or professor, use their given title. It’s important to use Mr. or Mrs. when addressing a colleague or someone senior. Roles are very well defined.

Indians might ask questions that are perceived as personal by Western standards. These questions must be answered because being too guarded with your responses can be viewed negatively. Do not openly complain that you feel uncomfortable with such questioning. The questions may include wage, marriage, children, and family. Moreover, interruptions are completely normal in Indian communication, so don't be alarmed.

Small talk is a good way of building trust – don't be afraid to include questions about family.

But please, avoid drawing parallels between India and Pakistan or Bangladesh, and avoid talking about this topic altogether. Crude humor and swearing can be offensive as well. Indians don't take criticism of India as a country well, they also do not appreciate criticisms about a person's abilities, appearance, or attributes – be sensitive!

What to talk about?

Cricket

Festivals

**Indian
cuisine**

**Legends
and tales**

**Archite-
cture**

What to avoid talking about?

**Entrepre-
neurship**

**The caste
system**

**Economic
al status of
India**

**Divorces
and ex-
partners**

**Intimacy
of any sorts**

Non-verbal communication



Etiquette requires a handshake, although some Indians may use the namaste greeting. When exchanging business cards, make sure to receive the card with your right hand, and put it away respectfully.

The business dress code mostly consists of smart, comfortable clothing. Ties are not compulsory – except for traditional sectors – such as banking or law. Women are advised to wear a trouser suit, rather than a skirt. Body language in India has a lot of significance attached to it. Aggressive postures, such as folded arms, or hands on hips should be avoided.

Do not touch your ears or the top of your head – these are considered sacred while feet are considered very unclean. A hand wave (western “hello”) means go away or no in India. Pointing with fingers is considered offensive, pointing should be done with the chin or whole hand, a thumb. Nodding does not mean agreement; it only means acknowledgment of what is being said.

Meetings

Sticking to a strict meeting schedule is not common in India, so meetings usually start and finish late. Similarly, punctuality is not of the greatest importance – Indians are not very time-conscious people. It is completely polite to be slightly late and leaves a good impression if you are on time.

Due to the importance of hierarchy, it is advisable to greet the seniors first. Keep in mind, that it will be them, who will make decisions and final agreements because decisions are made at the highest level.

Things are not rushed in India, so starting a meeting with small talk is okay. Interruptions can occur even during meetings, not only in small talk and general communication. Moreover, answering your phone during meetings or being distracted without repercussions is mostly okay.

Handouts should be provided during presentations. It is advisable to use symbols familiar to the Indian side in presentations. The presentations should not be factual, sober, and “boring” in the Western style, but should instead strive to be colorful.

These meetings will follow the agenda closely, you’re also expected to arrive on time as punctuality is extremely important.

You’re expected to be proactive and take an active part in discussions, if you remain silent, it may be perceived as if you were uninterested.

Being on your phone, or otherwise distracted, is extremely rude and taboo.



Indians ask a lot of questions, repeatedly – but that does not mean that they are bad listeners.

Hofstede insights largest value

On Hofstede Insights, the leading cultural analytics online tool, Indians have scored the highest on the "Power distance" scale.

Indicating an appreciation for hierarchy and a top-down structure in society and organizations. If one were to encapsulate the Indian attitude, one could use the following words and phrases:

Dependent on the boss or the power holder for direction, acceptance of un-equal rights between the power-privileged and those who are lesser down in the pecking order, immediate superiors accessible but one layer above less so, paternalistic leader, management directs, gives reason/meaning to ones work life and rewards in exchange for loyalty from employees.

Germany

Germans do not like surprises. Sudden changes in business transactions, even if they may improve the outcome, are unwelcome. Business and business etiquette in Germany is viewed as being very serious. Germans do not appreciate more in a business context. In addition, counterparts do not need or expect to be complimented. Work culture is shaped in a Mentor and student type of relationship - managers guide the employees, rather than boss them around and monitor them. Germans do not need a personal relationship to do business and work and personal lives are rigidly divided.

Verbal communication



Germans are direct to the point of bluntness - the communication is clear and to the point. Frank and direct language are valued, whereas indirect and ambiguous comments are perceived as suspicious. "How are you?" a conversation started in the US will get you an answer to your question.

Titles are important in Germany. You will usually see people's qualifications listed on their business cards. For e-mails and in-person communication, it's always good to use a person's title and surname, as in Herr Schmidt or Frau Schmidt. If someone is a professor or doctor, it's best to use Dr. Schmidt or Professor Schmidt.

Along these same lines, it's not too common to be on a first-name basis with German co-workers, even if you see them almost every day. The proper protocol would be to use an honorific with your colleague's surname.

What to talk about?

German

Beer

Soccer

Cycling

Food

What to avoid talking about?

WW2

Personal
life

Current
events

Criticize Germans and
their country

Non - verbal communication

A short and firm handshake is the most typical greeting. It's best to shake everyone's hand upon entering and exiting a meeting and not to shake someone's hand with one hand still in your pocket. Also, maintain eye contact. This doesn't mean having an uncomfortable stare-down. It's just considered friendly and honest to look at someone directly rather than off to the side. No chewing gums.

Something to keep in mind is that Germans also like their personal space. Avoid friendly touching your co-worker's arm or shoulder during the conversation – it may be perfectly acceptable in some cultures, but not in the German business world.

German business dress code is conservative understated and formal. Men should wear a suit and tie. Of course, start-ups and modern firms will sometimes use a more casual and laid-back dress code.

Germans do not use many gestures, but making two fists with thumbs tucked inside means good luck.

When a German person arrives at or leaves from a table and physically cannot shake hands with everyone without causing discomfort to them, they may rap their knuckles on the table instead.

Meetings

Last-minute meetings are taboo in the German business world – Scheduling a meeting can take weeks if not months. These meetings should also be arranged between professionals of commensurate ranks. If a middle manager scheduled a meeting with a C-level executive, it would be considered an insult.

People enter meetings in order of importance – highest ranking first. Also, wait to be directed where to sit. Only a small amount of conversation may be before the meeting, Germans go to business very quickly.

Agendas are precise and detailed, followed rigorously – they always strive for decisive outcomes and results, rather than providing a forum for open and general discussion. It is therefore of extreme importance to be punctual.

Meetings are serious and formal, avoid any form of irony, and do not interrupt the participants. Avoid hard-sell tactics or surprises.

Presentations should not be vague, but specific – they should be also backed up by facts and figures because that is crucial. To avoid the unexpected, Germans will almost always have fall-back plans or alternate measures to overcome any issues. Germans often expect informative and well-documented answers to their questions, so have solid arguments that are backed up. It is also better to remain silent unless the floor is given to you. Do not make uninformed contributions.

Hofstede insights largest value

On Hofstede Insights, the leading cultural analytics online tool, Germans have scored the highest on the “Long term orientation” scale

Germany's high score of 83 indicates that it is a pragmatic country. In societies with a pragmatic orientation, people believe that truth depends very much on the situation, context, and time. They show an ability to adapt traditions easily to changed conditions, a strong propensity to save and invest, thriftiness, and perseverance in achieving results.

Czechia

“The people are intelligent, they are skillful, they are a bit different from the Germans because they don't plan as much, they are flexible and don't like sitting in meetings three times a day and thinking about what is going to be done and how.”

Verbal communication



Czechs are non-confrontational and often take an indirect approach to business dealings. In negotiation, Czechs generally offer what they expect to get and do not often give counter-offers.

Expect indirect communication – Czechs are very careful not to hurt anyone's feelings or to arouse disappointment. Their way of expressing rejection might be misunderstood by foreigners. Instead of saying “no” they rather use “It is difficult”, “We will see” or “We will try to get to that later”. Try to avoid high-pressure tactics to convince the other party as this might have the opposite result.

A simple “no” is not well-liked in the Czech Republic and is considered impolite because direct criticism is often taken personally. If you want to point out a mistake or a problem, express your comments gently.

Wait to be invited before using someone's first name or an informal greeting, as these are all signs of friendship. The offer to move to informal communication is generally offered by the woman, the older person, or the person of higher status. Moving to the informal without an invitation insults the person and may be viewed as an attempt to humiliate them.

Listen closely to how the other person introduces him- or herself. For it is recommended to pronounce Czech first and last names correctly. If someone introduces him- or herself directly with their first name, take it as a huge compliment. In addition, don't skimp on titles like “Engineer” or “Doctor”. They are gladly used in formal and business dealings and are simply part of the picture.

Non-verbal communication



Greetings should include a firm handshake and direct eye contact; a weak handshake means that you are weak, and no direct eye contact can be taken to mean that you are hiding something.

Do not remove your suit jacket unless the highest-ranking Czech does so first.

Czechs like using hand gestures when speaking.

Some customs, for example carrying your female business partner's bag, are unthinkable in some cultures, but are a simple courtesy in the Czech Republic. Open the door for her and pull out her chair for her. That will create a harmonic atmosphere.

Large organizations set a dress code for their employees. In small and medium-sized companies, there are no dress codes (unless employees have to wear uniforms). So, people tend to wear business casual attire, unless they are expected to attend an important meeting. However, if you want to be taken more seriously, consider elevating your style and appearance – appearance is important to the Czech community.

Do not remove your suit jacket unless the highest-ranking Czech does so first.

Meetings



It is preferable not to schedule meetings on Friday afternoons because many Czechs leave for their country cottages. It is also good to let your business partner know well ahead of the time that you would like to meet. Meetings on short notice may be difficult to set detail-oriented

There will often be some small talk at the start of a meeting, but this is limited in scope and duration.

What to talk about?

Hockey

Beer

Mountains

Cuisine

Soccer

Avoid talking about::

East Bloc

Czechoslovakia

Politics

Eastern Europe

Punctuality for meetings is taken extremely seriously. Punctuality is important because arriving late for a business meeting does not paint a good picture of you. Czech business society is becoming more tolerant, but only to a certain extent; 15 minutes is an acceptable delay with a good apology.

Presentations should be simple, accurate, and detailed and, if necessary, you should have charts and figures to back up your claims.

Cards are usually exchanged at the start of a meeting. As a great deal of importance is placed on titles and educational backgrounds, it is quite a good idea to ensure that this information is printed on your business card.

Czechs tend not to show too much emotion within a business meeting and this, coupled with limited body language and facial expressions, can make your counterparts quite difficult to read. Do not mistake a lack of emotion or physical feedback as a sign of a lack of interest.

Business is conducted slowly. You will have to be patient and not appear ruffled by the strict adherence to protocol.

Hofstede insights largest value

On Hofstede Insights, the leading cultural analytics online tool, Czechs have scored the highest on the scales:

Uncertainty avoidance

'Long-term orientation'

The Czech Republic scores 74 on this dimension and thus has a high preference for avoiding uncertainty. Countries exhibiting high Uncertainty Avoidance maintain rigid codes of belief and behavior and are intolerant of unorthodox behavior and ideas. In these cultures there is an emotional need for rules (even if the rules never seem to work) time is money, people have an inner urge to be busy and work hard, precision and punctuality are the norm, innovation may be resisted, security is an important element in individual motivation.

With a high score of 70, Czech culture is shown to be pragmatic. In societies with a pragmatic orientation, people believe that truth depends very much on the situation, context, and time. They show an ability to adapt traditions easily to changed conditions, a strong propensity to save and invest, thriftiness, and perseverance in achieving results.



We trust that you found the presentation engaging and insightful. If you're keen on bringing this workshop to your company to enhance workplace communication, don't hesitate to reach out to Ostrava Expat Centre. We would be happy to assist you and tailor the workshop to meet your specific requirements and goals.



Tyršova 1683/20,
Ostrava City Centre, 702 00
info@ostravaexpat.eu



www.ostravaexpat.eu