



Global Employee Benefits Newsletter

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Multicultural Awareness

Learning about different cultures is so useful and rewarding that we have decided to continue our articles on multicultural awareness. This time, we detail some business etiquette tips for two countries celebrating their 40th anniversary with the Swiss Life Network: Ireland and South Africa*.

IRELAND

Doing business in Ireland

The attractive environment for businesses in Ireland is reflected in the World Bank's *Ease of Doing Business Survey* for 2017. The country was ranked 18th out of 190 economies, scoring especially well when it comes to paying taxes (5th), starting a business (10th), and protecting minority investors (13th).

Fast facts

Business hours

The work week in Ireland is Monday to Friday, with office hours generally from 9am to 5.30pm, with an hour-long lunch break. Religious and family holidays are important in Ireland, and arranging meetings over Easter and Christmas should be avoided, as most people take time off around these holidays.

Business language

Although Irish is the first and official language of Ireland, it isn't commonly spoken. Business is always conducted in English.

Dress

Business dress is modest and conservative. Dark, subdued colours are the norm; raincoats may be necessary throughout the year.

Gender equality

While men still dominate the Irish business arena in terms of senior positions, women are treated equally and many women hold high positions in Irish business and political circles.

Greeting

A firm handshake and direct eye contact are appropriate when greeting Irish associates. Shake hands again when leaving.

Business culture in Ireland

Humour

Although the business culture in Ireland is generally conservative, the Irish are known for being modest and having a good sense of humour. Jokes and teasing are a part of general conversation, and this can extend to business meetings as a way to build rapport and avoid conflict.

Hierarchy

Business structures in Ireland are hierarchical. Decisions are usually made at the top, but the division between managers and their subordinates can sometimes be blurred. Irish businesspeople are often less formal and more friendly than their European counterparts.

Meetings

Business meetings can be unstructured and it is not unusual to meet outside the office - in a coffee shop or even over a pint of Guinness at the pub. Many business interactions also take place on the golf course.

Networking and establishing good rapport is important in Irish business and visitors should allow for small-talk before negotiations officially begin. Polite conversation can centre on Irish culture and sport, but politics and religion should be avoided. Once negotiations start, the meeting should be focused on business, and conversation should be direct and to the point.

Business cards are exchanged, but not necessarily immediately upon meeting.

The Irish have a reputation for being shrewd negotiators with a preference for systematic procedures and a relaxed sense of time, meaning that decision-making can be a slow process.

When attending meetings you should ensure that you arrive on time. Being late is seen as impolite and inconsiderate.

Family and religion

Family forms an integral part of Irish culture. Although they work very hard, the Irish are dedicated to a less stressful lifestyle that allows time for friends and family, a visit to the pub, a cup of tea, or just a bit of a chat on the corner. Families are closely-knit and very important to the Irish. Many businesses are family owned and business in Ireland is often based on who a person knows, making relationships integral to success in the workplace. Religion also plays an important role in Irish culture. Most of the population is Catholic, which has deeply influenced cultural values and social norms in Ireland.

Dos and don'ts of business in Ireland

- Don't speak about politics or refer to the Republic of Ireland as part of the United Kingdom, or Northern Ireland as part of the Republic of Ireland. These are two completely different political entities and this is a sensitive subject.
- Don't talk about religious matters.
- Do exchange business cards when meeting with Irish associates.
- Do maintain an arm's length distance when speaking to Irish counterparts. Personal space should be respected.
- Do maintain eye contact when speaking to Irish associates. This is seen as a sign of respect, and avoiding eye contact may be viewed with suspicion.

SOUTH AFRICA

Your guide to conducting business in a proudly South African style

South Africa is a country that has come a long way from being a monotone cultural workforce to the diversified business hub it is today.

Business-to-business culture is generally very professional and of international standard. With 11 official languages in South Africa, most South Africans can speak two or more languages. Despite the number of languages spoken, business dealings are generally conducted in English.

Although the country represents one of the most multicultural nations, there are some common threads in what businesses in South Africa perceive as 'proper' and 'improper' business etiquette. A successful partnership with a South African company is reliant on a sound understanding of how all cultures come together and affect business dealings.

Here are guidelines to assist you in conducting business in South Africa and fostering a strong partnership that rests on a pillar of trust.

Hierarchy in South Africa

The South African economy is still dominated by large corporations. Robust government intervention and planning for the development of the small and medium enterprise sector is an ongoing priority. The state's commitment to this sector is to encourage and assist entrepreneurial efforts to address the country's high unemployment rate.

Although the traditional structure of businesses is top-down style, with the top layer holding almost all the decision-making power, the influence of global trends has somewhat impacted these structures by flattening them, opening a space for decentralised decision making and added responsibilities at all levels within companies.

Meetings

To organise a meeting, make the appointment at least a month in advance and confirm the day before. Punctuality is very important. In corporate offices or the financial services sector, the dress code is quite conservative and a suit or dress is always a good option when meeting clients and business partners. A handshake is common when meeting, and visiting cards are widely used on entering business premises.

Meetings can be rather informal. Punctuality to the schedule is important, but also plan sufficient time between meetings in case the meeting host is not on time.

There will be considerable time to engage in small talk at the beginning of a meeting, to greet the participants and exchange business cards. Gift giving in a business context is uncommon in South Africa.

Negotiations

Personal relationship building requires great effort but will have a desirable outcome for your dealings in South Africa. South Africans build strong relationships with those they can trust. Prospective business partners who provide win-win / mutually beneficial solutions for all parties involved are usually the ones who win the business.

Decisions

It is prudent to negotiate with the person who actually has the authority to make decisions. Deadlines are not really perceived as binding commitments but rather as somewhat fluid. It is therefore advisable to include dates when setting up a contract with your business partners.

Appointments

Appointments are necessary in South African business, with preferred methods being face-to-face encounters rather than a telephone call or email. Arriving at the meeting spot five to fifteen minutes before a face-to-face meeting is seen as good conduct.

Mid-December to mid-January, or the two weeks surrounding Easter, are prime holiday periods. Scheduling meetings during these times is not advisable.

Dress code

South African work attire is more or less conservative. It is, however, very common to come across people dressed in traditional African garments at work or during business meetings. This is certainly common during evening gatherings and dinners.

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Entertainment

Business lunches and dinners are very common in South Africa. Business breakfasts are also quite popular. Although actual negotiations are not carried out during a meal, business may be discussed and this is a sound relationship-building opportunity.

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