

## Doing Business in Belgium | Belgian Social and Business Culture

### A Belgian Culture Overview

#### Fact file

- **Official name** – Kingdom of Belgium
- **Population** – 10,414,336\*
- **Official Language** – Dutch, French and German
- **Currency** – Euro (EUR)
- **Capital city** – Brussels
- **GDP** – purchasing power parity \$390.5 billion\*
- **GDP Per Capita** – purchasing power parity \$37,500\*



### A Belgian Overview

The second most densely populated country in Europe, Belgium is a small country located on the southern shores of the North Sea. Often referred to as the crossroads of Europe, Belgium is home to many key European institutions and has a long history of cultural interactions with most of the major European ethnic groups. With two very distinct cultural regions, Flanders (Dutch speaking) and Wallonia (French speaking), and a uniquely multilingual capital, Brussels, Belgians do not have a strong connection to a national culture, but rather to the language or region they were raised in. While many differences exist, most Belgians are firm believers in the modern world but take pride in historical traditions and their tolerance towards foreigners. Understanding these contradictory elements is crucial in order to successfully do business in Belgium.

### Belgian Culture – Key Concepts and Values

**Formality** – Belgian culture still retains much of its historical traditions and formalities. A strong hierarchy exists and titles and formal greetings are still used. Though they may greet foreigners with a certain level of formality, Belgians will quickly welcome you with generous hospitality. Be sure you respect this formality, particularly in a business environment.

**Family** – As a relatively traditional society, Belgians place a lot of importance on family life. As such a small country, even if a family lives on opposite sides they are still able to get together quickly and frequently.

**Egalitarianism** – While status tends to be determined by your family, level of education, job and age, most Belgians like to think they are of equal status. Gender traditionally played a role determining status, but it is increasingly unacceptable to judge or treat someone differently because of their gender. Class differences are no longer as prevalent, however there exist certain sensitivities between the two regions which can result in tension or feelings of inequality. These are a result of both historical and economic factors, particularly since the Dutch are doing much better economically than the French.

**Compromise** – As a society with a strong emphasis on family life and egalitarianism, Belgians always try to compromise rather than argue or disagree about things. Decision-making in business can therefore be a slow process since many parties will contribute their ideas before a decision is made.

## Doing Business in Belgium

Belgium has long been the intersection of human movement across Europe. Having been invaded by many of the original European ethnic and cultural groups, it has only been a truly independent state since 1830. As the site of much of the fighting along the Western Front in the World Wars, Belgium has since been an active participant in multi-lateral bodies, including being a founding member of the European Community.

Now a modern industrialised society that depends heavily on foreign trade, especially with its European neighbours, Belgium is ideally located to reap the benefits of a highly integrated transportation infrastructure linking it to the industrial centres of Europe. The Dutch areas centred around the multicultural city of Brussels are faring much better economically than the Walloon section resulting in increased tensions between the two groups. Understanding the role of Belgium's history and economy and how it impacts Belgian culture and business is essential to successfully doing business in Belgium.

### Belgium Business Part 1 - Working in the Belgium (Pre-departure)

- **Working practices in Belgium**
  - Normal working hours are from 8:30-5:30pm with an hour in the middle for lunch though this can vary slightly depending on the type of company or store, level of position and specific location.
  - Appointments are necessary and should be scheduled a few weeks in advance. When scheduled over the phone, a confirmation of the meeting is normally exchanged in the form of a letter or email.
  - Arriving on time to business appointments or meetings is important so give advance notice if you are running late or unable to make it. Bear in mind that traffic in Brussels can be particularly bad so give yourself extra time to get to your destination.
- **Structure and hierarchy in Belgian companies**
  - Most companies operate from the top-down, with decisions being made by senior members of the company who first consider the ideas of those below them.
  - People from Wallonia tend to place more emphasis on hierarchy than those from Flanders, but both appreciate a certain level of structure and procedures.
  - Those in higher ranking positions are expected to have a lot of expertise and experience. They should be good leaders who are approachable and open to new ideas.
- **Working relationships in Belgium**
  - Relationships are an important part of Belgian business culture. Whether at the beginning of a meeting or during lunch, it is important to take the time to get to know your Belgian counterparts before discussing business.
  - Belgians keep their private and public spheres separate. While they may appear friendly and welcoming, you are not really considered a friend until you are invited to their home.

- Similar to how Belgians value their privacy, they also like to keep about an arm's length distance between people when speaking.
- Belgians are relatively open people and enjoy having engaging and intellectual discussions. It is a good idea, however, to avoid speaking about topics such as politics and the differences that exist between the two culturally distinct regions as there are strong tensions and sensitivities that exist.

## Belgium Business Part 2 - Doing Business in Belgium

### ○ Business practices

- The formal nature of Belgian business culture means that most people use titles when addressing each other. Those in Flanders tend to use titles and last names longer than those in Wallonia, but both will tend to use first names once they get to know you or among family and friends.
- Addressing someone as Sir or Madam is the most polite form. In Dutch, these terms translate as *Meneer* and *Mevrouw* and in French as *Monsieur* and *Madame*. The formal form of 'you' is also used until you get to know someone.
- Meetings are generally a place for people to share and discuss ideas and not a place where decisions are made. The first meeting usually serves as an opportunity to develop relationships and trust, before getting down to business.
- Handshakes are the most common form of greeting in business settings, but you will often see people kissing each other on the cheeks to say hello or goodbye in more informal situations such as among friends, family or close colleagues.

### ○ Business Etiquette (Do's and Don'ts)

- ✓ DO ensure that you are not interrupted during a meeting with your Belgian counterparts. Answering the phone or leaving the room to get more coffee is considered rude and inconsiderate to others in the meeting.
- ✓ DO dress conservatively and as formally as possible. Men should wear dark suits and ties while women tend to wear nice dresses or elegant suits. Belgians take great pride in the way they dress as it shows your professional achievement and status.
- ✓ DO find out what language your counterparts use beforehand so as to not offend them by using the wrong language. Belgians are sensitive to language differences, particularly between Dutch and French, so if you are unsure, it is best to use English until asked to do otherwise.
- ✗ DON'T remove your jacket in a formal business situation until you see others doing so. Belgians are particularly mindful of their appearance and like to maintain a certain level of formality in business situations.
- ✗ DON'T schedule meetings during the months of July and August since most people take holiday during this time.

- \* DON'T reject an invitation to lunch with your Belgian counterparts. Belgians are proud of their food and enjoy their meals so take the opportunity to enjoy it with them and build stronger relationships.

### Belgian Culture Quiz – True or False

1. Starting a presentation with a joke helps to lighten up the atmosphere and get people's attention.
2. Talking to someone with your hands in your pockets is considered impolite.
3. Gifts are appreciated but avoid anything with your company logo.
4. Belgians like to keep their office doors open at all times.
5. It is considered rude to sneeze or blow your nose in public.

### Culture Quiz - Answers

1. False. Belgians expect and appreciate a certain level of formality in business situations. Jokes and humour are saved for more personal and informal affairs.
2. True.
3. True.
4. False. Belgians value their privacy and formality so office doors are kept closed. Before entering, always knock and close the door behind you.
5. True. If possible, try to leave the room or turn your head away when doing so.

\* Source: CIA World Factbook 2007

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