

Doing Business in France | French Social and Business Culture

A French Culture Overview

Fact file

- **Official name** – French Republic
- **Population** – 64, 057, 792*
- **Official Language** – French
- **Currency** – Euro (EUR)
- **Capital city** – Paris
- **GDP** – purchasing power parity \$2.097 trillion*
- **GDP Per Capita** – purchasing power parity \$32, 700*



A French Overview

A modern and diverse country, France encompasses a wealth of landscapes and identities influenced by an amalgamation of cultural and historical differences. As the largest Western European country, France is a nation that takes immense pride in its history and prominent culture. Such cultural identities play a crucial role in French business culture, where appropriate conduct, mutual trust and understanding are the key to your organisations success.

French Culture – Key Concepts and Values

Centralisation – France has a long and notable history of centralisation reflected in its geography, transportation system, Government and business. This outlook originated in the power and authority of the earlier monarchs and despite the democratic society, remains a significant part of the French presidency today. In the world of French business, centralisation exists in the concentrated authority that generally lies with one individual.

Individualism and individuality – France’s distinguished individuality is an important cultural characteristic that describes the French passion for uniqueness and freedom of opinion, both in society and in business. However, individuality should not be confused with the term individualism, which is equally essential in France, but refers to having a separate but equal sense of place in society. Individualism in the French business environment means that a greater concern is placed on social status and being judged as an individual.

Uncertainty avoidance – One aspect of French culture that has a major influence on business in France, is the country’s attention to rules and regulations. The French have a low tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity, which, for those wishing to conduct business in France, is significant in their reluctance to take risks.

Doing Business in France

France has always played a crucial part in both European and World events. After experiencing two World Wars, the loss of an Empire and numerous political and social upheavals, France has emerged as a vital component in the European Community with a strong sense of pride and heritage. Today, the French business market boasts a variety of international investors and is an important world supplier of agricultural and industrial

products. The country also demonstrates one of the highest rates of economic growth in Europe. However, for those organisations wishing to enter the French business environment, an understanding of the country's culture is a vital skill for your company to possess.

France Business Part 1 - Working in France (Pre-departure)

- **Working practices in France**
 - Arriving for business appointments 10-15 minutes after the scheduled time is not uncommon, but you should always aim to arrive at the stated time. If you cannot, you will be expected to call them to let them know.
 - Generally speaking in French business culture, deadlines are open to negotiation but this is fast changing as French businesses incorporate more Anglo-Saxon business practices and stricter attitudes to time.
 - Business organisations in France are highly organised and well structured. Rules and administrative practices tend to be favoured over flexibility, particularly in the public sector.
- **Structure and hierarchy in French companies**
 - There exists a strong, vertical hierarchy in French business culture which respects the Cartesian way of thinking. Working with all levels of the business organisation will ensure your success.
 - In French business culture, the highest individual in authority still tends to be the only one who can make the final decision.
- **Working relationships in France**
 - The French have an inherent sense of privacy exhibited in their definite distinction between business and personal life. Don't expect to be invited out in the evenings after work as most people will go home to their families.
 - Relationships are an important part of French business culture, and you will often spend a few minutes getting to know your colleagues before discussing business.

France Business Part 2 - Doing Business in France

- **Business practices**
 - In French business culture it is customary to only use first names when invited to do so. Sometimes the French will introduce themselves by saying their surname first, followed by their Christian name.
 - Lunch is one of the best places to forge business relationships in France, but business lunches are not as common as they used to be. If invited to one, it is always polite to accept.
 - A business meeting should begin and end with a brisk handshake accompanied by an appropriate greeting and the exchanging of business cards.

- Despite the formality of French business culture, it is not uncommon practice to stray from the agenda during meetings. Initial meetings are often dedicated to information sharing and discussion, rather than reaching final decisions.
- **Business Etiquette (Do's and Don'ts)**
 - ✓ DO maintain an air of formality and reserve during all business practices and at all levels within the business, using titles wherever possible.
 - ✓ DO make direct but moderate eye contact with your French business colleagues.
 - ✓ DO try to learn a few basic French phrases and use them whenever possible. Your efforts will not go unnoticed.
 - ✗ DON'T discuss your family or other personal matters during negotiations.
 - ✗ DON'T be put off by frequent differences in opinion and rigorous debate during business negotiations. The French will appreciate your ability to defend your position.
 - ✗ DON'T rush or display signs of impatience with your French counterparts. The French take their time before arriving at a decision.

French Culture Quiz – True or False

1. In France, the 'OK' sign is the equivalent of the figure 'nought', or 'zero'.
2. Cheese is often served the beginning of the meal.
3. Interrupting during business meetings is a sign of disrespect. You should remain silent until your counterpart has finished speaking.
4. Using the 'tu' form with business associates is acceptable.
5. If your host asks you if you would like seconds, tell them no even if you would like some.

French Culture Quiz - Answers

1. True.
2. False. The French usually serve cheese after the main meal and before a sweet dessert.
3. False. Interrupting is a sign that you are interested in what your business colleagues have to say.
4. False. Using the 'tu' form is only appropriate once you get to know someone, if you have been invited to use it with the person, or if you are speaking to children.
5. True. Saying no is polite, but often the host will insist that you have seconds.

* Source: CIA World Factbook 2007

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