

## Doing Business in Greece | Greek Social and Business Culture

### A Greek Culture Overview

#### Fact file

- **Official name** – Hellenic Republic
- **Population** – 10,737,428\*
- **Official Language** – Greek
- **Currency** – Euro (EUR)
- **Capital city** – Athens
- **GDP** – purchasing power parity \$343.6 billion\*
- **GDP Per Capita** – purchasing power parity \$32,000 \*



### A Greek Overview

A country of ancient heritage and a vibrant culture, Greece is often referred to as the cradle of European culture. Greece offers a vast diversity of experiences and landscapes from the nightlife of Athens to the beautiful Aegean islands and historic ruins of Delphi. A member of the European Union and the Eurozone, Greece's economy has become increasingly strong, particularly in its region. Understanding and appreciating Greek social and business culture is paramount to successfully work with Greek counterparts.

### Greek Culture – Key Concepts and Values

**Family** - The family is the basic social unit in Greek society, closely followed by the village. Loyalty to family is paramount and put ahead of all business interests. Interruptions such as phone calls at work caused by an individual's family are common and not seen as disturbance.

**Personal Relationships** - Personal relationships are extremely important in Greece. People in Greece take a sincere interest in others and spend a lot of time socialising. Successful business often depends on trust and personal relationships rather than qualifications and performance. Therefore, investing time in getting to know your Greek colleagues and clients by showing interest and joining their lifestyle and social activities is vital for successful business with them.

**Time** - Greeks tend to be polychronic which means that they prefer to do many things at once. They can be easily distracted and subject to numerous interruptions. Plans are changed often and easily and are not necessarily adhered to.

**Religion** - The majority of Greeks are Greek Orthodox. The religion has influence on every layer of life in Greece. Almost all holidays are associated to the church calendar and new buildings are blessed by the church. The church's authority reaches most Greek institutions which also results in close links to the state.

**Humour** - Humour is frequently used in Greek conversations. However, Greek humour may be perceived as rude and even vulgar since satirical jokes are common.

## **Doing Business in Greece**

Greece has achieved a strong and growing economy through the implementation of reforms and stabilisation policies. Solid economic growth rates in recent years have contributed to a drop in unemployment and to an enhanced quality of life in Greece. The country's key business sector is tourism however other industries increasingly gain significance. Having a comprehensive understanding of Greek culture and how it impacts the economy and business operations is essential for successful living and working in Greece.

### **Greek Business Part 1 - Working in Greece**

#### ○ **Working practices in Greece**

- Uniform business hours for retailers across Greece were set by law in 2005. Business hours are from 9am to 9pm Monday to Friday and 9am to 6pm on Saturdays. Banks are normally open to the public Monday to Thursday from 8am to 2pm and Friday from 8am to 1:30pm.
- Greeks have a flexible attitude towards time. Therefore, don't be surprised if business meetings or social events begin late. Being patient and including some extra time in your schedule can help business relationships with your Greek counterparts.
- Greeks tend to keep a small distance to their counterparts during conversations. Physical contact is commonly used to show empathy and to emphasise the subject matter.

#### ○ **Structure and hierarchy in Greek companies**

- Business structures in Greece are strictly hierarchical which is reflected in the directive and authoritative leadership style.
- The Greek economy is characterised by large conglomerates run by dynastic families. Greek society is therefore extremely relationship-oriented and having the 'right' contacts is essential in order to successfully conduct business in Greece.
- Management styles in Greece tend to follow the principle of managing people not personnel. The personal problems of employees are taken seriously and dealt with in a paternalistic way.
- Greek women are treated relatively equal to men and receive little discrimination compared to other European countries. Therefore, it is not uncommon to see both women and men in every level.

#### ○ **Working relationships in Greece**

- Greek culture is very group-oriented. Building deep and lasting relationships is therefore very important for Greeks. Personal contacts and networks are prerequisites for successful business deals. The establishment of trust, loyalty and strong bonds facilitates business operations in Greece.
- Greeks work best in teams and excel through interaction. Individual actions are rare and seen with suspicion.

- Greeks are usually friendly and warm. However, saving face and respecting each other's honour is essential since Greeks are very proud and easily offended.

## **Greek Business Part 2 - Doing Business in Greece**

### ○ **Business practices**

- The official language is Greek. Many business people have a very good knowledge of English but Greek language skills are an advantage. If you do not have a proficient knowledge of Greek it is wise to bring an interpreter to meetings.
- There is a general distrust of written communication. Contracts tend to be rather simple since amendments are regularly made depending on the needs of either side.
- Personal contact is essential when doing business with Greeks. Try to avoid conversations via the phone or email since Greeks prefer to conduct business face-to-face.
- The Greek attitude towards work tends to reflect the philosophy of 'working to live' rather than 'living to work'. The family clearly takes precedence over the job.
- Business in Greece is conducted quite slowly due to the importance laid upon the development of personal relationships. Being patient and including extra time in your schedule can help business relationships.

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

- ✓ DO have printed material in both English and Greek.
- ✓ DO try to learn some Greek. Even though many business people speak basic English, it is considered a compliment if you attempt to use the Greek language.
- ✓ DO use every opportunity to socialise with your Greek counterparts. Personal relationships with colleagues are highly valued in Greece.
- ✓ DO avoid controversial conversation topics such as the name conflict with Macedonia.
- ✗ DON'T be offended or surprised if your Greek colleague enters your personal space.
- ✗ Don't criticise your Greek counterparts in front of other business colleagues, as this may cause a loss of face and harm their sense of honour.
- ✗ DON'T show an open palm directed at someone's face. This may be seen as an insult.

### **Greece Culture Quiz – True or False**

1. Birthdays are important celebrations in Greece.
2. It is normal that business is conducted only during the third meeting.
3. Physical contact that reaches beyond the handshake is not appropriate in Greek business culture.
4. Greeks tend to nod when they disagree.
5. Greek business people prefer to have conversations via the phone and email as opposed to personal contact.

### **Greece Culture Quiz - Answers**

1. False. Most Greeks celebrate 'name days' more which includes the exchange of gifts.
2. True. Greek people value personal relationships. Often the first meetings are used to get to know the counterpart and find out whether he or she can be trusted.
3. False. Greeks tend to welcome physical contact and conversing with close proximity is common. Embracing and kissing on the cheek is commonly used in Greece.
4. True. Disagreement is signalled by shaking the head.
5. False. Personal contact is paramount in Greece.

\* Source: CIA World Factbook 2009

Author: Christina Langhans, BBA, MA Intercultural Communication in Europe

### **Contact Details**

Communicaid  
Mitre House  
12-14 Mitre Street  
London  
EC3A 5BU

Tel: +44 (0)20 7648 2140

Fax: +44 (0)20 7648 2178

E: [info@communicaid.com](mailto:info@communicaid.com)

W: [www.communicaid.com](http://www.communicaid.com)