

Doing Business in Oman | Oman Social and Business Culture

An Oman Culture Overview

Official name – Sultanate of Oman

Population – 3,418,085 *

Official Language – Arabic

Currency – Omani rial

Capital city – Muscat

GDP – purchasing power parity \$67 billion*

GDP Per Capita - purchasing power parity \$20,200*



Overview

Oman is a geographically diverse country of mountainous uplands, deserts and expansive pristine coastlines. Omani culture is rich in heritage and traditions, influenced by years of marine and desert ways of life, Islam and a diverse mix of ethnic groups. Traditionally a conservative country which has spent decades in self-imposed isolation, Oman under its current Sultan has become more open and modern. Today Oman strives to create a more modern state which respects and incorporates its strong cultural heritage and traditions. Understanding this unique Middle Eastern culture and Omani business etiquette is essential for anyone wishing to successfully do business in Oman.

Omani Culture – Key Concepts and Values

Islam – In order to fully comprehend the culture of Oman, it is important to understand the extensive influence of religion on society. Oman is the only Muslim country to have a majority of Ibadhi sect followers which contributes to their conservative culture.

Islam governs every aspect of a Muslim's life, from holidays to the food they eat to how they dress and do business. Generosity, modesty and respect for others are key concepts which are present in both social and professional spheres of life.

Hospitality – Omanis are known for their extreme hospitality and generosity in both social and professional contexts. Omanis welcome guests with a variety of traditions and rituals, the most important of which is the serving of coffee, or *kahwa*. Omani hospitality is closely connected to their desire to establish trust and build relationships with people before doing business. Foreigners should therefore show their gratitude for this generosity and spend time getting acquainted with their Omani business counterparts.

Face – Dignity and respect are key elements in Omani culture, preserved mainly by the concept of saving face. Through the use of compromise, patience and self-control, Omanis avoid embarrassing or putting others down so as prevent them from losing face. Public criticisms are therefore rare and are instead given in private where there is less risk of losing face. When doing business with Omanis it is important to remember this and avoid doing anything which might offend them or make them look bad in front of others.

Family – Omani culture places a high importance on family and tribal connections. The family and tribe are highly influential and play a role in shaping a person's values and behaviour. Loyalty to both comes before anything else, even in a business context where it is not uncommon to have several members of one family working for the same company.

Doing Business in Oman

A relatively isolated country with a strong heritage and Islamic influence, Oman has a long history as an independent state. Upon regaining independence in the 17th century, Oman began a period of maritime exploration and expansion to the east coast of Africa and parts of India. After several periods of unrest and a series of friendship treaties with Britain, Oman gained recognition as an independent state in 1951. By 1970 a new Sultan came to power and has since led Oman toward massive economic and social improvements. The discovery of oil drastically improved Oman's economy, but in recent years attempts have been made to diversify the economy to avoid relying too heavily on the oil industry. Today, Oman's efforts to modernise and open its borders combined with its attractive economy is increasingly drawing interest from foreign investors. Investing or doing business in Oman successfully requires an in-depth understanding of Oman's unique business culture and etiquette.

Oman Business Part 1 – Working in Oman (Pre-departure)

- **Working practices in Oman**
 - The Omani working week begins on Saturday and ends on Wednesday. Thursday and Friday are the official days of rest. Office hours tend to be 0900-1300 and 1630-2000 with some variation during holidays.
 - Omani attitudes to time are much more relaxed than in many Western cultures. People and relationships are more important than schedules and punctuality. It is not uncommon, therefore, for your Omani counterparts to arrive late but foreigners are expected to arrive on time.
 - Meetings should be scheduled in advance and confirmed a few days prior. Meetings are often cancelled or rescheduled however with little notice so always come prepared with a business card or letter to leave to let them know you were there.
- **Structure and hierarchy in Omani companies**
 - Most Omani companies have a strong vertical hierarchy. Decisions tend to be made from the top-down by the most senior member.
 - Status is an important part of Omani society and is determined by factors such as age, wealth and family or tribal relations. Those with status have a high level of authority and should be shown deference.
 - The hierarchy present in Omani society is often seen in the use of titles and formal greetings. When first entering a room or greeting your Omani counterparts for the first time, for example, you should shake hands with the most senior person first using their appropriate titles.
- **Working relationships in Oman**
 - Relationships and mutual trust are paramount for any successful business interaction and can only be developed through face-to-face meetings. It is important to therefore spend time with your Omani business counterparts and have frequent meetings to ensure that the relationship continues to develop.

- Family and friends come before anything else. Take the time to get to know your Omani business counterparts on a person level so that you can develop a friendship with that person and therefore be in a better position of priority for business dealings.
- As part of the relationship building process, guests are often invited to partake in festive occasions or simply share a meal together. Accepting these invitations will help strengthen your relationship with your Omani counterparts. If you are a businesswoman or have a female partner, however, be prepared to be separated from the group since men and women do not eat together during traditional meals or religious festivals.

Oman Business Part 2 – Doing Business in Oman

o Business practices in Oman

- The customary greeting is “As-salam alaikum,” (peace be upon you) to which the reply is “Wa alaikum as-salam,” (and upon you be peace). When entering a meeting, general introductions will begin with a handshake. You should greet each of your Omani counterparts individually, however, it is generally uncommon for a Muslim man to shake hands with a woman. It is best to always wait for the woman to extend her hand first.
- Initial business meetings are often a way to get to know your Omani business counterparts. They are generally long in duration and almost always accompanied by the traditional Omani coffee and pastries. Time should be allocated for such business meetings, as they are an essential part of Omani business culture.
- Business cards are common but not essential in Omani business culture. If you do intend to use business cards whilst in Oman ensure that you have the information printed in both English and Arabic.

o Omani Business Etiquette (Do's and Don'ts)

- ✓ DO address your Omani counterparts with the appropriate titles Doctor, Shaikh (chief), Mohandas (engineer), and Ustadh (professor), followed by his or her first name. If unsure, it is best to get the names and correct form of address of those you will be doing business with before hand. The word "bin" or "ibn" (son of) and “bint” (daughter of) are often present in a person’s name and serve as important indicators of family roots.
- ✓ DO show respect to your Omani counterparts by maintaining strong eye-contact. This also serves to strengthen trust and mutual understanding.
- ✓ DO abide by local standards of modesty and dress appropriately. Most Omani men will wear the traditional white full-length robe but foreign men are expected to wear conservative clothing such as a suit. Women are expected to wear modest clothing and avoid any ostentatious jewellery or accessories. Attire might be more casual in the summer due to the extremely high temperatures but modesty is always essential.
- ✓ DO keep a close distance between you and your Omani counterpart. The distance between two people tends to be smaller in Oman than in most Western countries. This shows respect to the other person and helps strengthen relationships.

- ✱ DON'T schedule business meetings during prayer times or any of the major Islamic holidays such as Ramadan or Eid. These are extremely important periods for the majority of Omanis who are Muslims. Business is usually put on hold during these occasions as it is a time for reflection and celebration.
- ✱ DON'T appear loud or overly animated in public as this type of behaviour is considered rude and vulgar. Maintaining an element of humility and displaying conservative behaviour at all times is important.
- ✱ DON'T rush your Omani counterparts during business negotiations. Communications and business dealings take more time than in most Western countries so patience and flexibility are key for successful business interactions in Oman.
- ✱ DON'T ask about a person's wife or daughters. It is polite to enquire about a person's family or health, but never ask specifically about any female members. Family life which involves female members is kept extremely private.

Omani Culture Quiz – True or False

1. Most restaurants offer Western style seating, but traditionally people eat on the floor.
2. While hand shakes are the most common form of greeting, Omanis are known to still greet each other in the traditional way by exchanging a kiss on the cheek.
3. Omanis tend to rely on concrete facts and information to guide them in business dealings.
4. According to Islam, the left hand is considered unclean and reserved for personal hygiene. Omanis traditionally use the right hand for all public functions – including shaking hands, eating, drinking and passing objects to another person.
5. It is impolite to decline any offer of coffee.

Omani Culture Quiz – Answers

1. True.
2. True. This is especially true for close friends or family.
3. False. While facts and information help provide support to an argument, Omanis rely on how well they know and trust a person and their emotions to guide them into making decisions at the right time.
4. True.
5. False. It is polite to accept at least the first couple of cups of coffee, but if you have had enough then you can politely decline by gently shaking your cup when they try to serve you more.

* Source: CIA World Factbook 2007

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