

Doing Business in Slovakia | Slovak Social and Business Culture

A Slovak Culture Overview

Fact file

- **Official name** – Slovak Republic
- **Population** – 5,463,046*
- **Official Language** – Slovak
- **Currency** – Slovak koruna (SKK)
- **Capital city** – Bratislava
- **GDP – purchasing power parity** \$119.5 billion*
- **GDP Per Capita – purchasing power parity** \$21,900 *



A Slovak Overview

Slovakia, a forward looking country in Central Europe with a strong identity and rich cultural heritage, became independent in 1993 through a “Velvet Divorce” from the neighbouring Czech Republic. Situated at the heart of Europe, Slovakia is a landlocked country of rugged mountains, vast forests and open fields. With a modern and innovative outlook, Slovak people are friendly and open-minded while simultaneously giving great importance to values of modesty and respect for tradition. Knowing the Slovak history and understanding the mentality of its people is the key to doing business successfully with Slovaks.

Slovak Culture – Key Concepts and Values

Identity – Slovak people are proud of their country and their rich cultural heritage and value their national identity. It is important for foreigners not to confuse Slovakia and Slovenia, the former Yugoslavian country. Equally important is the distinction between Slovakia and the Czech Republic so care is needed when comparing the two. However, Slovaks and Czechs do feel close to each other, a relationship deriving from sharing a similar culture, language and history.

Tradition - Everyday life in Slovakia is influenced by traditional values. Established gender roles, an emphasis on Catholicism, class differences, hierarchy and respect for the elder are still prevalent characteristics of Slovak culture. As the country becomes more modernised and westernised, Slovak culture is gradually changing but still maintains a high level of tradition.

Modesty – Slovak people are generally modest and humble. Being assertive and self-confident can be perceived as being self-centred and Slovaks have difficulties “selling themselves”.

Doing Business with Slovaks

Since the recent establishment of the nation, Slovakia continues to master the transformation from a centrally planned to a modern market-oriented private economy. Having been under communist rule for most of the late 20th century, Slovaks are forward thinking and eager to develop the country’s foreign business and internal economy. As a member of the EU since 2004, the current coalition government is in the process of preparing the country for Euro adoption in 2009.

Successfully doing business in Slovakia requires a thorough understanding of the country's social and economic history and business culture as well as an interest in developing genuine relationships with the Slovak people.

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

- **Working practices in Slovakia**
 - Appointments should be arranged in advance and punctuality is valued. As there can sometimes be difficulties in obtaining an answer to a fax or telephone, it is advisable to also send a letter to confirm any planned meetings. However, the use of Internet as a means of business communication is continuously increasing.
 - Meetings are generally conducted by the most senior person, who also sets the agenda. Written summaries and notes from meetings are encouraged to minimise misunderstandings between business partners.
 - Office working hours are usually between 9:00am and 6:00pm. July and August are the holiday months so many businesses close for an extended period of time.
- **Structure and hierarchy in Slovak companies**
 - Hierarchical structure and power relations still characterise the Slovak business environment, although westernisation is increasingly influencing Slovak business culture.
 - Considerable distance between managers and subordinates is maintained and expected. Equal partnership and consensus is not emphasised or necessary. Decision making is restricted to senior managers and can be quite a lengthy process.
 - Due to a top- down management tradition, employees are not accustomed to openly expressing their ideas and opinions to those of higher rank. Employees therefore expect to receive instructions from the top and are not comfortable questioning superiors.
 - Traditional roles of women are changing and today women are increasingly seen in most professions. However, Slovak men still retain a privileged position in the home, social and business world.
- **Working relationships in Slovakia**
 - It is essential to develop good personal relationships and establish respect and credibility before doing business with Slovaks.
 - Slovak people have a strong sense of personal pride and do not like to be publicly criticised. Conflicts or problematic issues should be confronted privately or in a close group of colleagues. Slovaks are hesitant to criticise foreigners and problems are usually dealt with on an ad hoc basis, being ignored only until critical.
 - Understanding the Slovak communication style is crucial to interacting successfully with Slovak people. Communication is direct yet diplomatic with sensitive information being delivered subtly.

Slovakia Business Part 2 - Doing Business in Slovakia

○ Business practices

- In business situations, shaking hands is the most common form of greeting. It is polite for a man to wait for the woman to extend her hand first before shaking it.
- Formal/professional titles are normally used when greeting or addressing someone, especially with those more senior or older. First names are used among friends or family, or once people get to know each other.
- In Slovak there is a distinction between the informal and formal “you” form with the formal one being commonly used. However, with the younger generation this is changing and interaction is usually less formal when the conversation is in English.
- The dress code largely depends on your position and where you work. Managers and executives are expected to wear business suits while lower ranking employees can wear slightly more casual clothing. Generally, women still prefer dresses or two-piece suits with skirts and blouses as formal wear. As a rule, it is always better to be overdressed than dressed down.

○ Business Etiquette (Do’s and Don’ts)

- ✓ DO maintain eye contact with your business partner, indicating that you are serious and trustworthy. If you avoid eye contact people may doubt your sincerity.
- ✓ DO enquire in what language Slovaks prefer the written business documents and be prepared to offer an interpreter for meetings. Although English is the predominant business language today and most Slovaks understand it, be prepared to provide information in Slovak.
- ✓ DO maintain a shoulder length’s distance when speaking to Slovaks. Touching each other is uncommon and even considered unacceptable in formal situations.
- ✗ DON’T be late for meetings or fail to meet deadlines. Slovaks take time seriously and respecting it indicates genuineness and politeness.
- ✗ DON’T forget to bring a small gift if invited to your business partner’s home.
- ✗ DON’T grant any privileges to people in the company just because they are your friends or family. A collectivist culture, protectionism in Slovakia is still quite widespread; nevertheless it is perceived as unethical and is frowned upon.

Slovak Culture Quiz – True or False

1. When offered a gift by a Slovak person, you should accept it immediately.
2. When making a toast at a Slovak dinner, make sure you clink your glass with your counterpart’s glass and look directly into his/her eyes.
3. Weather, politics and money are good topics of conversation in Slovakia.
4. When visiting someone’s house in Slovakia, although your host will insist that you leave your shoes on, you should take them off.
5. Small talk and exchanging of personal experiences with your Slovak partners is important before getting down to business.

Slovak Culture Quiz - Answers

1. False. It is customary to wait for multiple offers before accepting a gift.
2. True.
3. False. These topics should be avoided as they are regarded as boring and only talked about when people do not know what to talk about.
4. True.
5. True.

* Source: CIA World Factbook 2007

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