

Doing Business in Turkey | Turkish Social and Business Culture

A Turkish Culture Overview

Fact File

- **Official name** – Republic of Turkey
- **Population** – 76, 805, 524*
- **Languages** – Turkish (official), Kurdish, Arabic, Armenian, Greek
- **Currency** – Turkish Lira (TRL)
- **Capital City** – Ankara
- **GDP** – purchasing power parity \$906.5 billion*
- **GDP Per Capita** – purchasing power parity \$12,000*



Overview

Turkey is a vibrant amalgamation of two unique cultures, reflecting a diverse collection of ideas, beliefs and values. Crossing both European and Middle Eastern boundaries, Turkish society is patriotic and proud of its ancestry and achievements. The rapid modernisation of the country, combined with its traditional values, makes Turkey a fascinating market for foreign businesses but requires an understanding of its cultural design in order to secure your future business success.

Turkish Culture – Key Concepts and Values

Family – The most essential social unit in Turkish culture is the family. A Turk's personal life is dependent on and revolves around family, friends and other community groups. These, in turn, command one's opinions and decisions. Family loyalty is a vital aspect of Turkish society and one that has a major impact on Turkish business practices. Many businesses in Turkey are still family-owned and run and the concept of family connections and influence is apparent during business exchanges in Turkey.

Polychronic time – Turks tend to juggle several activities and issues at the same time and continue multiple conversations simultaneously. Thus, in a Turkish business environment, it is not uncommon for phone calls to be taken during scheduled meeting and for people to enter the meeting room without invitation. Business meetings tend not to follow a linear system and are rarely structured. As a result, you should be prepared to exercise patience when conducting business in Turkey.

Islam – Modern day Turkey is a secular state; however the philosophy and ideology of Islam still remains a prevalent feature of Turkish culture. Although not so prominent in the more Western-influenced areas of the country, the Islamic culture of Turkey continues to influence cultural life, beliefs, language, teaching, social relationships and democracy. It infiltrates all levels of society, providing guidance, values, and rules for personal life, public behaviour and business etiquette.

The Turkish Economy

Founded in 1923 after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish Republic has witnessed periods of instability and recurrent democratic power. Today, Turkey is an associate member of the European Union, and is undergoing many changes in order to strengthen its democracy and integrate its economy into a more global field. Turkey's economy is a dynamic blend of both modern and traditional industries, with an increasingly strong private sector. Turkey's geographical position offers an excellent base for economic activities throughout the region and is emerging as a powerful cultural and political focal point. Such an increasingly attractive business environment presents many advantages and potential opportunities to businesses wishing to expand in this area of the world.

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

- **Working practices in Turkey**
 - It is important to schedule business appointments in advance to ensure that you avoid Turkish holidays. Try not to make appointments during Ramadan (the fasting period) and the months of July and August as these are the most common times for Turkish business people to take their annual holiday.
 - Punctuality is taken seriously in all business contexts; therefore you should call ahead if you expect to be delayed.
 - Given the influence of Islam on Turkish society, daily routines, appointments and meetings must be fitted around each of the five daily prayer times.
- **Structure and hierarchy in Turkish companies**
 - The Turkish business environment exhibits much respect for rank, education and authority. Generally speaking, senior members of a Turkish company are often only met once trust has been established by those below them.
 - Decisions are always made by the most senior business people. However, due to the strong sense of collectivism that underlines Turkish business culture, the decision maker will often consider the group involved in that decision.
 - As a sign of respect and courtesy for Turkish culture, you should always address the eldest or most senior person in the room first. In Turkey, age is a sign of wisdom and consequently demands respect in all aspect of society.
- **Working relationships in Turkey**
 - In Turkish business culture, the distinctions between the professional and personal domains of life are not clearly defined and may overlap. Consequently, personal relationships play a significant role at all levels.

- As a result of the value placed on the family unit in Turkey, it is not uncommon for the most senior business person to be viewed as a father or mother figure who should consider the well-being of their employees' family and social duties.

Turkey Business Part 2 – Doing Business in Turkey

○ Business practices in Turkey

- In Turkish business practice, it is respectful to address a Turkish professional by his or her occupational title alone, should they have one, e.g., 'Doctor' or 'Lawyer'. However, Turks are generally informal with names and when meeting someone for the first time they tend to address people by 'Mr' or 'Mrs' followed by their first name.
- The exchange of business cards is common practice. Although there is no formal exchange ritual, you are advised to present your card with both hands and, if possible, have one side of your card translated into Turkish. Offer your business card to everyone you meet, especially to those with whom you wish to establish a business relationship.
- At the start of any business meeting or social gathering, it is customary to greet your Turkish counterparts with a handshake; failure to do so may be considered rude. Shake hands firmly with everyone present using your right hand. Men should wait for women to extend their hand first.
- Engaging in small talk before beginning business discussions is important for establishing rapport in Turkey. It is a good idea to get to know your Turkish counterpart on a personal level, as business relationships are built on trust and mutual friendship and are a prerequisite for doing business. Turks prefer to do business with those they know and respect; therefore time spent establishing a personal relationship will be beneficial to future business dealings.

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

- ✓ DO maintain eye contact with your Turkish counterpart whilst speaking, as Turks take this as a sign of sincerity.
- ✓ DO dress conservatively. You will be expected to wear a suit and tie. Women should avoid short skirts, low-cut blouses or shorts.
- ✓ DO ensure that you greet each of your Turkish counterparts individually. The most common greeting is 'Merhaba' but 'Selaminalayküm', a greeting with a more religious connotation can also be used.
- ✗ DON'T back away if your Turkish colleagues stand close to you during conversation. Turks do not require as much personal space as many other cultures and this may be construed as unfriendly.

- ✘ DON'T use deadlines or high pressure tactics during business negotiations with your Turkish colleagues as they will be counterproductive. Be patient during negotiations as decision making can be slow.
- ✘ DON'T offer gifts that are too lavish or personal and be sure to check that your Turkish counterparts drink before giving alcohol. The exchanging of gifts is not a predominant feature of Turkish business culture. However, if a gift is given it will be gratefully accepted.

Turkish Culture Quiz – True or False

1. Your Turkish counterparts may ask questions that may be considered personal in some cultures, such as, for instance, those regarding age and salary. However, it is not polite to ask such questions yourself until a friendship has been established.
2. In Turkey, putting your thumb between your first two fingers is considered to be a rude and insulting gesture.
3. The US gesture of wagging the head to indicate “no” means “I don’t understand.”
4. Open displays of affection between two people is a common practice in Turkey.
5. During a business meal in Turkey, it is customary to share the bill.

Answers

1. True. Personal connections are vital to establishing successful business relationships in Turkey.
2. True.
3. True. “No” is indicated by a light upward nod of the head, a raising of the eyebrows and often hissing of teeth (like “tsk”).
4. False. Affectionate behaviour in public is considered inappropriate in Turkish culture.
5. False. The concept of sharing the bill does not exist in Turkish culture. If you are invited out for dinner, the protocol of Turkish hospitality dictates that the host always pays for the meal.

*Source: CIA World Factbook 2007

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