

## Doing Business in Zambia | Zambian Social and Business Culture

### A Zambian Culture Overview

#### Fact File

- **Official Name** – Republic of Zambia
- **Population** – 11,862,740\*
- **Official Languages** – English
- **Currency** – Kwacha (ZMK)
- **Capital City** – Lusaka
- **GDP** – purchasing power parity \$17.39 billion\*\*
- **GDP Per Capita** – purchasing power parity \$1,500\*\*



#### Overview

Formerly Northern Rhodesia, Zambia gained its independence from the British in 1964. Named after the Zambezi River and home to the Victoria Falls, Zambia is a beautiful southern African country. Its population primarily consists of seven major and more than seventy minor tribes, each nourishing its own traditions and vernaculars. Unlike its neighbours Zambia has never experienced serious tensions between the groups. People from different backgrounds have always liked to mingle creating a unique and vibrant fusion of cultures. Understanding these elements is essential for anyone embarking on a business venture with Zambia.

#### Zambian Culture - Key Concepts and Values

**Kinship** – The clan in the sense of the extended family is central to Zambian life. It is the main source of personal identification and provides assistance to members whenever needed. Family relationships are the most important and are given priority over individual needs. The head of the family traditionally makes all decisions and represents his clan at village and community meetings.

**Religion** – Just over half of the population follows Christianity yet traditional animistic religion remains pervasive in Zambian culture. Myths and legends are passed on from one generation to the next and the elders continue to perform tribal rites and customs. Zambians are tolerant towards people of other faiths but may find it difficult to understand if someone is not religious at all.

**Time** – Zambians approach time in a very relaxed manner. Schedules are not adhered to and it is common for meetings to be delayed by one or two hours. Although people tend to be more punctual in professional settings, working hours and deadlines are perceived as an orientation rather than fixed timeframes.

## Doing Business in Zambia

Zambia is blessed with large mineral deposits which have significantly helped economic development. Thanks to high copper prices in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century Zambia became one of Africa's richest countries but was hit hard when prices dropped from the 70s onward. Twenty years later its foreign debts were among the highest in the world. To counter this downfall the government began reforming its economy in the early 90s. Recent trade liberalisation, privatisation and budgetary changes have created a solid economic environment and contributed to significant economic progress since. Taking advantage of this growing economy requires a profound understanding of local social and business culture.

### Zambian Business Part 1 - Working in Zambia (Pre-departure)

- **Working practices in Zambia**
  - Business hours in Zambia are Monday to Friday from 8.00 to 17.00 with a one hour break for lunch between 13.00 and 14.00. Some offices also operate on Saturdays.
  - Appointments should always be scheduled in advance but be prepared that they may not be kept without giving prior notice.
- **Structure and hierarchy in Zambian companies**
  - Business structure in Zambia is hierarchical and has a strong influence on working relations. Zambians refrain from addressing questions to their supervisors as they fear this might give the impression of incompetency or laziness. Ask open ended questions often to ensure you find out if something is wrong.
  - In business organisations managers or senior members tend to have the final word. It is not uncommon for them to ask fellow colleagues for input or comments but their final decision is rarely challenged.
  - Men and women tend to keep separate in Zambian culture and have clearly defined responsibilities. Women are seen as the care givers to the family but are also expected to do their share of field work. Although many women are part of the urban workforce, leadership remains dominated by men. Foreign women in high positions should therefore be prepared for a fair amount of attention from their Zambian counterparts.
- **Working relationships in Zambia**
  - Clan relationships and responsibilities among the members tend to influence business culture so it is important to understand how this can impact your work with Zambian counterparts.
  - Zambians like to add a personal touch to their working environment. Employees often exchange niceties and take the time to chat about their family. Get to know your Zambian counterparts before talking about business.

- Respectful behavior and education are qualities which are highly regarded by your Zambian counterparts. Foreigners are usually considered ‘experts’ in their sector and are often more trusted than local supervisors as they are not involved in kinship obligations and responsibilities.

## **Zambian Business Part 2 - Doing Business in Zambia**

### **o Business practices in Zambia**

- Greetings are very important in Zambian business culture and the most senior attendant should always be greeted first. Address people by their surname and with their full title unless the person asks you to be more informal.
- Handshakes with the right hand are used by men and women among each other. Men and women may shake hands as well but they are more likely to greet each other at a distance by clasping their hands together in front of their chest. Don’t be surprised if people at your company shake hands with each other every morning.
- In the office Zambians dress business casual and usually only wear suits to formal events. A lack of attention to how you are dressed is perceived as laziness and considered rude. Smart trousers and a shirt or blouse are considered appropriate. Women also tend to wear long skirts. Be careful not to expose your knees or shoulders.
- Zambians prefer an indirect communication style. Problems are never addressed directly but are instead referred to in a more implicit way. If you want to address an issue it is best to do it through a third party or in private.

## **Zambian Business Etiquette (Do’s and Don’ts)**

- ✓ DO use your right hand when interacting with people. The left hand is considered unclean in Zambia.
- ✓ DO accept invitations to social events as this will help you build trust and establish strong relationships with your Zambian colleagues.
- ✓ DO arrive on time to meetings. Even though Zambians have a very relaxed approach towards time they often expect foreigners to be punctual.
- ✗ DON’T raise your voice when you are angry. Zambians avoid speaking loudly and instead prefer a soft tone.
- ✗ DON’T refuse gifts as they are a sign of respect or gratitude.
- ✗ DON’T point your index finger at other people or try to get their attention by whistling as these gestures are considered rude.

### **Zambia Culture Quiz - True or False**

1. If Zambians are discontent with a person they tend to avoid contact. .
2. Zambians look each other straight in the eye when conversing.
3. Physical contact between sexes is hardly seen in public.
4. Zambians refrain from showing emotions publicly.
5. Zambians like to touch each other's head as a gesture of affection.

### **Zambia Culture Quiz - Answers**

1. True. Zambians do not confront problems directly but show emotions more subtly.
2. False. Direct eye contact is considered rude in most situations, especially when talking to someone more senior than you. Women should be careful with making eye contact with men as it may be understood as flirting.
3. True. While Zambians exchange physical contact in public with friends from the same sex, it should be avoided between men and women.
4. True. Expressions of anger or joy should only be expressed at home.
5. False. This is perceived to be belittling and may only be used with children.

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\* Source: CIA World Factbook 2009

\*\* Source: CIA World Factbook 2008

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