

France | French Social and Business Culture

A French Culture Overview

Fact file



- **Official name** – French Republic
- **Population** – 60, 424, 213* (July 2004 est.)
- **Official Language** – French
- **Currency** – Euro (EUR)
- **Capital city** – Paris
- **GDP** – purchasing power parity \$1.654 trillion* (2003 est.).
- **GDP Per Capita** – purchasing power parity \$27, 500* (2003 est.).

Overview

A modern and diverse country, France encompasses a wealth of landscapes and identities influenced by an amalgamation of cultural and historical differences. As the largest Western European country, France is a nation that takes immense pride in its history and prominent culture. Such cultural identities play a crucial role in French business culture, where appropriate conduct, mutual trust and understanding are the key to your organisations success.



French culture – key concepts and values

Centralisation – France has a long and notable history of centralisation reflected in its geography, transportation system, Government and business. This outlook originated in the power and authority of the earlier monarchs and despite the democratic society, remains a significant part of the French presidency today. In the world of French business, centralisation exists in the concentrated authority that generally lies with one individual.

Individualism and individuality – France's distinguished individuality is an important cultural characteristic that describes the French passion for uniqueness and freedom of opinion, both in society and in business. However, individuality should not be confused with the term individualism, which is equally essential in France, but refers to having a separate but equal sense of place in society. Individualism in the French business environment means that a greater concern is placed on social status and being judged as an individual.

Uncertainty avoidance – One aspect of French culture that has a major influence on business in France, is the country's attention to rules and regulations. The French have a low tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity, which, for those wishing to conduct business in France, is significant in their reluctance to take risks.

France has always played a crucial part in both European and World events. After experiencing two World Wars, the loss of an Empire and numerous political and social upheavals, France has emerged as a vital component in the European Community with a strong sense of pride and heritage. Today, the French business market boasts a variety of

international investors and is an important world supplier of agricultural and industrial products. The country also demonstrates one of the highest rates of economic growth in Europe. However, for those organisations wishing to enter the French business environment, an understanding of the country's culture is a vital skill for your company to possess.

France business Part 1 - Working in the France (Pre-departure)

- **Working practices**
 - Arriving for business appointments 10-15 minutes after the scheduled time is not considered late and is therefore acceptable in France.
 - Generally speaking in French business culture, unless specifically stated, deadlines are open to negotiation.
 - Business organisations in France are highly organised and well structured. Consequently, rules and administrative practices are favoured over effectiveness or flexibility.
- **Structure and hierarchy**
 - There exists a strong, vertical hierarchy in French business culture. French bosses generally take a dictatorial and authoritative approach.
 - It is essential that you work successfully with all levels of the business organisation, despite the clear hierarchical structure.
 - In French business culture only the highest individual in authority can make the final decision.
- **Working relationships**
 - The French have an inherent sense of privacy exhibited in their definite distinction between business and personal life. Respecting this privacy is particularly important when working in France.
 - In accordance with French business culture, relationships must be formed first before business can begin.

France business Part 2 - Doing business in France

- **Business practices**
 - In French business culture it is customary to only use first names when invited to do so. Sometimes the French will introduce themselves by saying their surname first, followed by their Christian name.
 - Lunch is the best place to forge business relationships in France. The subject of business, however, should only be brought up by the host and at a later stage in the meal.

- A business meeting should begin and end with a brisk handshake accompanied by an appropriate greeting and the exchanging of business cards.
- Despite the formality of French business culture, it is not uncommon practice to stray from the agenda during meetings. Initial meetings are often dedicated to information sharing and discussion, rather than reaching final decisions.
- **Business etiquette (Dos and Don'ts)**
 - ✓ DO maintain a constant air of formality and reserve during all business practices and at all levels within the business, using titles wherever possible.
 - ✓ DO make direct but moderate eye contact with your French business colleagues.
 - ✓ DO try to learn a few basic French phrases and use them whenever possible. Your efforts will not go unnoticed.
 - ✗ DON'T discuss your family or other personal matters during negotiations.
 - ✗ DON'T be put off by frequent differences in opinion and rigorous debate during business negotiations. The French will appreciate your ability to defend your position.
 - ✗ DON'T rush or display signs of impatience with your French counterparts. The French take their time before arriving at a decision.

French Culture Quiz – true or false

1. In France, the 'OK' sign is the equivalent of the figure 'nought', or 'zero'.
2. When invited for dinner at a French friend or colleague's home, you should always bring a bottle of wine?
3. Interrupting during business meetings is a sign of disrespect. You should remain silent until your counterpart has finished speaking.
4. Slapping the open palm over a closed fist is considered a particularly rude gesture.
5. It is customary to leave a small amount of food on your plate at the end of a meal to signify you have enjoyed it and to avoid insulting your host.

Answers

1. True.
2. False. A French host will be expected to carefully choose the wine to match the meal.
3. False. Interrupting is a sign that you are interested in what your business colleagues have to say.
4. True.
5. False. Leaving food on your plate is considered impolite.

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* Source: CIA The World Factbook 2004

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