

Doing Business in Poland | Polish Social and Business Culture

A Polish Culture Overview

Fact File

- **Official name** - Republic of Poland
- **Population** - 38, 635, 144* (July 2005 est.)
- **Official language** - Polish
- **Currency** - Zloty (PLN)
- **Capital city** - Warsaw
- **GDP** - purchasing power parity \$463 billion*
est.)
- **GDP Per Capita** - \$12, 000* (2004 est.)



Overview

Established as an independent nation in the middle of the 10th century, Poland reached its political and military zenith in the 16th before internal fighting combined with external influence provoked its partition. Poland briefly regained its independence in 1918 only to see it lost again following the invasion by German and Soviet troops in 1939. The end of the war saw Poland become a Soviet satellite state which lasted until the democratic party “Solidarity” (*Solidarność*), led by Lech Walesa, swept to power in 1990.

The following years have seen significant economic, social and political reform culminating in Poland joining NATO in 1999 and the European Union in 2004.

A unique history and geography has shaped the customs and distinctive personality of the Polish people. Today, Poland emerges as a culturally rich and proud nation where the contemporary meets the traditional.

Polish culture - Key concepts and values

Identity – A characteristic feature of Polish culture is its commitment to and involvement in the life of the country. Poland is a patriotic nation, united by the strong sense of community felt by its citizens. Following centuries of invasion from neighbouring countries, the Polish people are proud to have maintained an unbroken cultural identity and value their recently attained autonomy.

Relationships – As a family-focused society, the Polish are reliant on the building and maintaining of close personal relationships. Given Poland’s history of occupation, it is generally the case that outsiders must earn the trust of their Polish acquaintances before a close relationship forms. For this reason, when conducting business in Poland, you may find that your Polish colleagues adopt a fairly formal approach to begin with and it may take several meetings before any final decisions are made.

Roman Catholicism – At various points in this country’s history, religion has played a central role in Polish society. As a result, Roman Catholicism serves as the foundation of Polish identity. As one of the most devout nations in Europe, almost the entire population of Poland is Roman Catholic. Even in present-day society, the Roman Catholic Church has a significant bearing on many aspects of Polish life and culture. It continues to provide both the country and its people with a basic sense of solidarity and constancy for the future.

Poland - the seventh largest nation in Europe - was the first country in the Eastern block to free its government from 45 years of Communist domination. Despite years of multiple occupation and wars fought to define its borders, Poland has continued to pursue a policy of liberating Polish society and reforming government procedures. The early 1990’s saw the country transform its economy into what is today one of the most successful economies in Central Europe. Recent acceptance into the EU and a fast-developing private sector has opened up the Polish market to potential foreign business ventures and investment opportunities. For those looking to enter into this vibrant new market, an understanding of the business culture behind it is essential.

Poland business Part 1 - Working in Poland (Pre-departure)

- **Working practices in Poland**
 - Generally speaking, official working hours are from 8 am to 4 pm, Monday to Friday with no official break for lunch. However, it is not uncommon for business lunches to take place around 4pm in Poland and continue well into the evening.
 - It is good business practice to arrive on time for business meetings in Poland. Although meetings often have no specific end time and can go on longer than planned, punctuality is vital for establishing your reliability.
 - When making a business appointment, you are advised to make it four to five days in advance and confirm the meeting the day before. Your Polish colleagues can be flexible and are often prepared to change schedules if necessary.
- **Structure and hierarchy in Polish companies**
 - Organisations in Poland have a strong respect for hierarchy and authority, with structure and delegation coming from above. This hierarchical style is reflected in many Polish business formalities and settings, including the decision making process and the use of professional titles.
 - Rules and regulations are an important part of the Polish business environment,

therefore your Polish counterparts will expect you to know and appreciate established protocol and business etiquette.

- Age and educational background often form the basis for corporate hierarchy. For this reason, when negotiating, it is advised to send delegates of a similar status to those of your Polish colleagues, both in age and professional qualifications.

- **Working relationships in Poland**

- When conducting business in Poland, in order to be successful, it is important to remember that relationships are a key factor. Building individual business relationships is essential to effectively achieve business objectives, especially when business will be conducted over a long period of time.
- Responsibility and position are clearly defined within Polish organisations. Levels of seniority should be noted, and particular attention and respect must be paid to both older members of the company and those in senior roles.

Poland business Part 2 - Doing business in Poland

- **Business practices in Poland**

- The exchanging of business cards is an accepted part of Polish business etiquette and should be done at the start of any initial meeting. Be sure to hand over your card first. Business cards printed in English are quite acceptable, so there is no need to translate them into Polish.
- Business negotiations in Poland adopt a reserved and contemplative approach to settling deals. Extended periods of silence are not uncommon and are an essential part of negotiating. Therefore, you should try not to fill the silences with unnecessary talk and avoid pressing your Polish counterparts for final decisions.
- In accordance with Polish business culture, it is customary to present your Polish counterparts with a small gift both at the beginning and the end of a business relationship. Appreciated items are generally those typical of your culture. Although, you should avoid giving overly expensive gifts as these may create the wrong impression.
- It is customary to start business meetings in Poland with some introductory small talk. This allows you to become more acquainted with your Polish counterparts and establish an initial business rapport. Conversational topics may cover a wide range of issues; including public life, family and your work experience. However, the subject of money should be avoided.

Polish Business etiquette (Do's and Don'ts)

- ✓ DO use personal titles where possible or the basic courtesy titles, Mr. (Pan), and Mrs. (Pani), followed by a surname or first name.
- ✓ DO try to learn some basic Polish words and greeting phrases, for instance “hello”, “goodbye”, and “thank you”. Your Polish business contacts will welcome your efforts and perceive them as a gracious gesture.
- ✓ DO smile and maintain direct eye contact during conversation with your Polish counterparts, as it helps to develop a feeling of trust with the people you are meeting. The Polish are particularly perceptive to nonverbal cues.
- ✗ DON'T be surprised if after the first few business meetings your business partner engages in more friendly conversation with physical gestures such as backslapping. A more personal approach is preferred once initial relationships have been established.
- ✗ DON'T over compliment your Polish business colleagues as it may create the impression that you are insincere in your business dealings.
- ✗ DON'T try to disguise your feelings and emotions. Openness and honesty are qualities that your Polish colleagues will appreciate and it will help build trust for future business transactions.

Polish Culture Quiz – true or false

1. When entering the meeting room in Poland, if there are people you do not know present, you should wait for a third person to initiate introductions.
2. It is quite acceptable to greet your Polish business colleagues with three “air kisses” to the cheeks.
3. Polish offices operate an open door policy where you are free to enter and discuss business at any time.
4. If you are invited to a Polish home, a small gift such as a bottle of wine or flowers for your host is generally expected.
5. Meetings are often scheduled for a Sunday when people have more time to discuss business matters.

Cultural Quiz - Answers

1. True.
2. False. The standard greeting in Poland is a firm handshake, unless the person you are greeting is a very close friend.
3. False. Doors are generally kept closed in Polish offices and require you to knock before entering.
4. True.
5. False. Sundays are always free from work and are devoted to the family.

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* Source: CIA The World Factbook 2005

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