

Doing Business in the United Kingdom | UK Social and Business Culture

A British Culture Overview

Fact file

- **Official name** – United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
- **Population** – 60, 270, 708 (July 2004 est.)*
- **Official Languages** – English, Welsh (about 26% of the population of Wales), Scottish Gaelic (about 60,000 in Scotland)
- **Currency** – Pound sterling
- **Capital city** – London (Wales: Cardiff, Scotland: Edinburgh, Northern Ireland: Belfast)
- **GDP** – purchasing power parity \$1. 664 trillion (2003 est.)*
- **GDP Per Capita** – purchasing power parity \$27,700 (2003 est.)*

Overview

The United Kingdom is a nation of cultural and ethnic diversity consisting of four countries each with a clear identity: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. A thoroughly multicultural society, the UK continues to blend its rich cultural heritage with a modern and innovative outlook. Knowledge and an appreciation of the basic cultural, ethical and business values of the UK is crucial to any organisation wanting to conduct business in such a varied yet traditional country.



British Culture – Key Concepts and values

Indirectness – The British, in particular the English, are renowned for their politeness and courtesy. This is a key element of British culture and is a fundamental aspect of British communication style. When doing business in the UK you generally find that direct questions often receive evasive responses and conversations may be ambiguous and full of subtleties. Consequently, it is important to pay attention to tone of voice and facial expression, as this may be an indication of what is really meant.

'Stiff upper lip' – This is a term often used to describe the traditionally British portrayal of reserve and restraint when faced with difficult situations. In British culture open displays of emotion, positive or negative are rare and should be avoided. During meetings, this means your British colleagues will approach business with an air of formality and detachment.

Humour – A vital element in all aspects of British life and culture is the renowned British sense of humour. The importance of humour in all situations, including business contexts, cannot be overestimated. Humour is frequently used as a defence mechanism, often in the form of self-depreciation or irony. It can be highly implicit and in this sense is related to the British indirect communication style.

The United Kingdom is renowned for its colourful history and strong sense of tradition that has been shaped by a colonial empire, both civil and European wars and an constitutional

monarchy. The fourth largest trading nation, the UK is fast becoming Europe's leading business centre. Supported by a long-established system of government and economic stability, the UK is an attractive base for overseas business, offering skills in areas such as research, development and technology. However, in order to operate successfully in the UK business environment, there are a number of important issues to take into consideration both before and during your time there.

UK Business Part 1 - Working in the UK (Pre-departure)

- **Working practices in the UK**
 - In accordance with British business protocol, punctuality is essential at any business meeting or social event.
 - When making business appointments it is best practice to do so several days in advance.
 - The British are inclined to follow established rules and practices; therefore decision-making is often a slow and systematic process.
- **Structure and hierarchy in UK companies**
 - Today, UK businesses maintain relatively "flat" organisational hierarchies. The principal divide is between managers and other ranks.
 - In general, the board of directors is the principal decision-making unit. Major decisions are made at the very top.
 - The British prefer to work in the security of a group-established order with which they can identify.
- **Working relationships in the UK**
 - UK managers generally favour the establishment of good working relationships with their subordinates.
 - The boss often takes the role of a coach, creating an atmosphere of support and encouragement.
 - Teamwork is very important, however there exists a strong feeling of individual accountability for implementation and error.

UK Business Part 2 - Doing business in the UK

- **Business practices in the UK**
 - Business meetings in the UK are often structured but not too formal and begin and end with social conversation.

- First names are used almost immediately with all colleagues. Exceptions are very senior managers. However, you should always wait to be invited to use first names before doing so yourself.
 - Business cards are an essential prop and are usually exchanged.
 - Negotiations and decisions are usually open and flexible. Your British counterparts will favour a win/win approach.
- **British business etiquette (Do's and Don'ts)**
- ✓ DO respect personal space. The British value their space and keeping an acceptable distance is advised.
 - ✓ DO remember to shake hands on first meetings. It is considered polite to do so.
 - ✓ DO make direct eye-contact with your British counterpart, however remember to keep it to a minimum or it could be considered impolite or rude.
 - ✗ DON'T ask personal questions regarding your British counterpart's background, occupation or income.
 - ✗ DON'T underestimate the importance of humour in all aspects of business in the UK.
 - ✗ DON'T forget that instructions are often disguised as polite requests.

British Culture Quiz – true or false

1. In accordance with British business etiquette, when entering a room allow those of a higher rank to enter first.
2. It is considered polite to enquire about an individual's profession and salary during an initial meeting in the UK.
3. In the UK, the number 13 is considered extremely unlucky.
4. When invited to an English home, it is customary to arrive at least 10-20 minutes before the arranged time.
5. Sitting with folded arms during a business meeting is a sign of boredom and that you are uninterested.

Answers

1. True. It is important to respect rank in the UK.
2. False. Asking about another's salary in the UK is particularly offensive and should never be done.
3. True.
4. False. Never arrive early. It is advised to arrive 10-20 minutes *after* the stated time when visiting someone's home.
5. True.

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* Source: CIA The World Factbook 2004