

Doing Business Abroad - Japan

An ancient culture which has evolved within the geographical boundaries of an island has produced a modern day society with unique values, traditions and customs. Doing business in Japan arguably poses the most potential for cross cultural misunderstandings.

However, Japan's professionals are well educated in doing business with the West and will try to modify their own behaviours to accommodate you. Nonetheless, doing business in Japan necessitates preparing oneself by understanding areas such as business culture, business etiquette, negotiation and meeting protocol.



Group Orientation

Altruism, team-work and group cohesiveness are all areas greatly stressed within Japanese society. Individual identity is defined by the social group. Consequently, when doing business, the Japanese stress compromise and self-discipline.

Hierarchy

With its roots in Confucianism, hierarchical structures classify an individual's position within a group and in society. Status is determined by factors such as age, employment, company and family background. The hierarchical system dictates that due respect be afforded to those of higher status. When doing business in Japan be aware of hierarchy and adapt your behaviour accordingly.



Building Relationship

When doing business in Japan a successful relationship with a Japanese colleague or client is based on three factors: sincerity, compatibility and trustworthiness. Sincerity means that you are compromising, understanding and you want to conduct business on a personal level. Compatibility is established when you are seen to be concerned about the personal relationship, the well being of the company and not just focused on financial gain.



Communication

The emphasis in Japanese culture on maintaining harmony has developed in such a way as to allow very vague forms of expression. The cultural logic behind this is that by avoiding direct or explicit statements one has a better chance of not causing offense. When doing business in Japan clarify meanings and dig deeper for more information. The Japanese are implicit communicators. An explicit communicator assumes the listener is unaware of background information or related issues to the topic of discussion and provides it themselves. The Japanese however assume the listener is well informed on the subject and minimises information relayed on the premise that listener will understand from implication. Thus the saying, "Say one, understand ten," i.e. you will be expected to understand nine additional points to every one made.

Meeting & Greetings

There is heightened sense of formality in Japanese interaction. When doing business in Japan, your suitability in respect to conducting business will be assessed during a first meeting, so always maintain a sense of professionalism. The bow is an integral part of Japanese society. It is used when meeting, getting attention, to show gratitude, to express sympathy or as an apology. Whilst doing business in Japan as a Westerner, you would not be expected to bow. You will most likely be greeted with a handshake combined with a slight nod of the head. Introduce yourself with your full name followed by your company name. It is important to use proper titles when addressing someone, so always establish the position of the other person. The exchanging of business cards when doing business in Japan involves a degree of ceremony. The card is seen to represent the individual, so should be treated with respect. Before travelling to Japan, ensure you have ample cards and have one side translated into Japanese. Include your position within the company on it. Invest in a carry case to store cards and keep this in the inside pocket of a suit jacket. When exchanging, offer your card with both hands or just the right hand. Present Japanese side up. Ensure there is no barrier between you and the recipient such as a table, chair or plant. When accepting always use two hands as this shows deference.