

An important part of developing a high international IQ is being capable of describing other cultures in a professional way. It is equally important to be able to describe your own culture, often in terms of business practices, if you are looking for international work. Generalizing about North American cultural business practice is difficult, since we have much cultural diversity. We must acknowledge, however, that there are some dominant cultural practices. Whether you are Boston insurance manager, or a West Coast Hollywood executive, your work habits and attitudes likely bear some similarity. This article describes these similarities within a cross-cultural employment framework. Note that the article uses the term "North American" to refer to the United States and Canada, and does not include our culturally distinct Mexican neighbours.

Our General Attitude Toward Work

- **Goal-Oriented and Hard-Working:** North Americans tend to be goal-oriented, placing high value on achievement, both in professional and personal life. This is evident in our respect for hard work. We value organizational skills and a goal-oriented, orderly work style. We value timeliness, efficiency and progress. Even in leisure time many of us pursue a hobby or personal interest with similar concentration, aiming for certain goals or levels of competence. We value upward mobility, self-improvement and success attained through discipline, hard work and playing by the rules. We often put professional life ahead of personal life. We are so concerned with tangible evidence of work being performed that we are sometimes "doers" rather than "thinkers." North Americans abroad tend not to put enough energy into developing personal relationships with colleagues, which in many cultures precedes the simple pursuit of results.
- **Law-Abiding:** North American ethical and moral values tend to be conservative and, as peace lovers, we are, mostly, a law-abiding nation. We draw a rather hard line between right and wrong and are not easily swayed from our judgments. This makes it difficult for us to accept different sets of values in other countries. For instance, hiring a close relative is a common and even desirable practice in many countries, but is regarded as a serious impropriety by many North Americans.
- **Separate Work and Personal Lives:** We make a clear distinction between our professional and personal lives. We carefully protect our privacy and keep our work life separate from our home life. Interruptions at work by friends or family members are generally frowned upon. We disapprove of colleagues who use office time to deal with family matters. In other cultures the interaction between personal and professional life flows far more liberally. We avoid doing business with friends or relatives for fear of ruining our personal relationships or creating conflicts of interest.
- **Polite but Not Necessarily Friendly:** North Americans (Canadians in particular) are seen as reserved and rather serious. We are often perceived by foreigners as cold and not particularly outgoing, polite but not necessarily friendly. Moreover, North Americans are generally considered humourless, unable to tell a good story or a joke. In many countries, humour and tactful frankness not only help in closing business deals, but often keep them going.
- **Lacking in General Cultural Knowledge, Focused on Work:** North Americans are known for their inability to discuss art, literature, politics and history. For many of us, our most meaningful exchange of ideas occurs about work. We tend to be suspicious of co-workers who display expertise or even simple interest in areas unrelated to the work at hand.
- **Avoiding Debate:** We generally drop a conversational item if we discover that our friends have differing views. The opposite is true within many cultures where discussing opposing views is considered enjoyable.

Business Protocol

- **First Contact:** In a business setting, North Americans use the handshake as their primary greeting. Among French Canadians it is not uncommon to precede business between well-established contacts by exchanging hugs and kissing on both cheeks. In general, however, a reserved demeanour and a strong handshake accompanied by direct eye contact is the norm.
- **Getting Down to Business:** Because of the lines we draw between our professional and private lives, we tend to get down to business quickly, leaving little time to socialize or get acquainted with new colleagues. In many cultures, socializing with business associates is an opportunity for people to get to know their partners on a personal basis, thereby building trust, the essential ingredient in mutually satisfactory arrangements.

- **Giving and Receiving Hospitality:** North Americans working abroad are frequently treated with tremendous hospitality. Hosts take extraordinary amounts of time to welcome us and show us around. When foreigners visit us in North America, we have difficulty reciprocating. Our adherence to our jobs and compartmentalized lives make it extremely hard to take days off to show visitors around, and we have no relatives willing to do the job for us.
- **Egalitarian Relationships:** North American society is not as rigidly stratified as most societies. We have a strong belief in social equality. We enjoy a high degree of social mobility and it is common for us to mix with people of different social classes and both genders. We are unfamiliar with a formal social class system. Because of this, North Americans abroad are often seen to be disrespectful of local power structures. We require that our superiors "earn" our respect, while in most other societies, authority is granted by status and rarely challenged. We tend to question authority. North American organizations are "flatter" and function with less hierarchy; thus, subordinates have easier access to senior levels of management. We value personal experience and expertise and disdain any recognition in the work place of family origins.
- **Respect for Space:** North Americans place high value on large homes and private working space. The need to maintain sufficient physical distance from colleagues is a large aspect of our business protocol. We tend to stand about a metre apart while conversing; in many other cultures people stand much closer and we find this disconcerting. Except for the hand shake, we don't touch colleagues. We covet the "closed" office space.
- **Blind Individualism:** In business situations, we focus on the task at hand and often pay little attention to context. Because we are individualistic, we tend to be impatient with group efforts, preferring to work on our own toward concrete goals. This sometimes involves cutting through red tape to improve efficiency. Superiors from other cultures may be offended by our neglect of the consultative or political processes.

Communicating

- **Formal Communication and Belief in the Written Word:** We use formal (often written) methods of communication, such as memos, structured meetings, minutes of meetings and letters. We tend to view verbal exchanges as inefficient and unreliable. With our respect for the documented word, we can feel left out of the action in some overseas work environments. While our local colleagues are doing business through the grapevine and assuming we are abreast of recent developments, we are sitting in the dark, waiting for the memos to come through!
- **Clear and Assertive Communication Style:** North Americans respect a direct communication style. We look for straight answers to our questions and tend to discuss issues in a blunt way. This bluntness can be hurtful in a culture where saving face is crucial to esteem.

Conducting Business

- **Time Is Money:** For most North Americans, time is money. We value punctuality and regard it as an expression of respect toward others. We hate to waste our own or other people's time. To us, time is a precious resource to be used, divided and assigned to particular activities.
- **Assessing the Facts:** Our favourite approach to problem solving is the step-by-step, linear model: we identify the facts and where they originate from, thereby constructing a cause-and-effect chain for gathering, sharing and analyzing information. In this process, intuition is not valued at all and emphasis is on hard facts. North Americans have little tolerance for ambiguity and will eliminate it rather than attempt to understand it.
- **Making Decisions:** We value managers who take immediate, decisive action after a problem-solving exercise. North American managers promote decision-making processes that involve both managers and staff. Supervisors offer support to employees and allow them to search for solutions, rather than providing ready-made answers. This approach can be disconcerting to non-Western societies, where there may be a more hierarchical process. For someone accustomed to taking orders, a supervisor's belief that an employee is equipped to solve her or his own problem might suggest incompetence on the part of the supervisor. A boss is meant to be all-knowing!
- **Getting Results:** Ours is a rational attitude aimed at eliminating problems. Once a decision is made, we want it carried out immediately. Delay generates anxiety. Because we tend to design courses of action that focus on results, less attention is paid to the process.