

INTERCULTURAL FLUENCY

GLOBAL SKILLS FOR BUSINESS



**Cultural top tips for UK businesses working with
Poland**

These 'Top tips' have been produced by our intercultural practitioners at British Council Poland, the majority of whom are Polish citizens.



Health warning

At British Council we believe that:

- individuals make a difference in any intercultural situation. In all cultures you will find many people who do not fit the stereotype.
- there are more similarities and connections between cultures than differences.
- being informed about the history and current affairs of the parts of the world we are working in is necessary for effective intercultural practice.

While providing 'top tips' about what is typical about a particular group of people can be useful, it is never enough.

Equally important are being aware of what cultural behaviours and values you bring to the mix and being able to adjust your behaviour to complement what actually happens when working in intercultural situations.

British Council can support you in acquiring good intercultural fluency skills and awareness.



Expect people to highlight what's going wrong rather than what's going well

In Poland, people often start by expressing negative comments, rather than being positive about what has worked.

If asked to express an opinion, Polish people will often start by listing the things that need to be corrected. Criticism comes before appreciation. What a Polish person is thinking in a situation such as this: 'If something is working, why should we talk about it.'

A Polish person will assume that you know that the fact they are talking to you is evidence enough that they take an interest and they appreciate what you are doing. If they didn't, they wouldn't bother.

They will not feel under an obligation to give positive feedback. The Polish attitude is 'If we are not having a problem, it means things are ok'. People feel obliged to act on feedback, unable to simply say: 'Thank you for your opinion. I will take it into consideration'.

It is difficult for Polish people to say 'no thank you' or give or receive constructive criticism because they are concerned that they will offend the other person.

It takes time for people to express themselves – they may not say anything and wait a long time before expressing an opinion that a course of action will not work.

What are people in Poland like?.



Data from the British Council's 'Cultural Preferences Survey', carried out in Poland in 2014. Survey respondents were asked to read a substantial list of words and phrases and decide which eight of these represent the characteristics of the people of Poland. The size of each characteristic in the image corresponds to the percentage of participants who selected it.

2 Build rapport by taking time and not being too friendly, too quickly

In Poland people like to keep their distance.

Polish people prefer to watch for a while, and they are distrustful if someone is too enthusiastic.

This contrasts with the UK where people are expected to be more demonstrative. In Poland, people may say 'I was taught not to express my emotions' - but when pushed, the expressed emotion is more likely to be negative.

Polish people like to maintain a distance and are not too direct. They expect politeness and even reserve at an introductory meeting. If someone is too friendly at the beginning, it is suspicious. You shouldn't use first names with people you don't know or only know a little.

It is a sign of good manners to use titles 'Ms' ('Pani') and 'Mr' ('Pan'). These can precede either the last name (very formal) or the first name (less formal). It is not unusual for some Polish colleagues, even those who work together for a long time, to address each other as e.g. Pani Anna, Pan Adam. In business relationships,

always wait to be invited before using someone's first name. Polish people prefer more formal official communication, especially in work situations. They believe things need to be clear and not too relaxed.

If communications are too informal, they may be perceived as disrespectful and there may be a fear of losing authority if the atmosphere is too friendly. For this reason you may do business with people for years and not be on a first name basis. Government officials are likely to be more formal than entrepreneurs or NGO representatives.

Only ask "How are you?" when you know someone. Something that can cause Polish people irritation is when UK counterparts ask "How are you?" and don't bother to listen to the response.

In Poland, we think that if someone asks such a question, they are really interested. So don't ask unless you are really interested and have the time to listen!



3 Be prepared for a society with traditional but changing values

Polish society is quite traditional and patriarchal. Stereotypes of how people should behave are strongly governed by their gender. Culture, politics and business are mostly male-driven. Ninety three per cent of mayors in Polish towns are men. On the other hand, people expect certain behaviour towards women. If a man does not allow a woman to enter a room first, or does not open door for her, it is considered impolite and disrespectful.

There is a lot of unresolved conflict - past history divides people. Post-World War II, Poland has been a fairly homogeneous society, but this is slowly changing and people are learning to be more tolerant. Still, Polish people are quite suspicious and often intolerant towards foreigners and also of each other. If someone is a guest, they are treated with respect, but if they stay in Poland, some will expect them to 'behave like we do'.

Racist, sexist and homophobic attitudes are common and people do not have a sense of political correctness which prevents them from expressing these views. Political correctness can even be perceived as being hypocritical or insincere.

Having said that, people in Poland might simply not be sensitive to which words in English are derogatory and which are not. For example, words which are now less used in the UK such as 'handicapped'.

Poland used to be a religious society, but this is changing. Due to our history, the Polish Catholic church has a huge impact on all aspects of life. However, for most people religion is not about being spiritual, but about being a member of a community.

It is advisable to bear in that topics such as religion, history or politics can be controversial. 'Safe' topics are the weather, traffic and health issues. People like to complain together about these things and it's actually very bonding and can 'break the ice' when meeting new people.



4 Earn trust by having achievable visions rather than unrealistic ones

When working with Polish people, one should be careful about raising unrealistic expectations.

When there is a big vision at the beginning with promises of having a huge impact, there will be a feeling of disappointment if less is accomplished.

This contrasts with the tendency in the UK of stating high standards and expectations at the initiation or planning phase in order to motivate others.

With UK colleagues, there is an understanding that the full ambition may not be achieved. In Poland, the likely response to such a vision is a feeling that it is wishful thinking. It may even negatively impact on trust-building. People like concrete, realistic actions with achievable, measurable results. They often say: 'Expect nothing and you won't be disappointed', or 'Expect the worst and then you will be pleasantly surprised'.

Polish people are sometimes considered cynical and negative. For example, they may think that 'everybody lies', a legacy of the communist past.

Motivational speeches seem to go well in some countries; but not in Poland - Polish people are allergic to propaganda. If people say 'I'm excited and happy to do it!' we are suspicious, because

we've heard it before and we know how it ends.

People in Poland tend to work to a different time rhythm to people in the UK and are more flexible about planning. They convene many meetings, where things are discussed and consulted, but not much gets done.

Action generally happens at the last minute, with everything coming together in the 11th hour. There can be a lot of procrastination and then panic at the very end, often involving huge resourcefulness and great commitment to the finish.

People tend to do things just before they are due, waiting until the moment is right. Things may be going on in the meantime, but not obviously. Polish people are very deadline-driven. When working on a longer project, it is worth having a few clear deadlines, instead of just one at the end.



5 Be prepared for hierarchical ways of working

Hierarchy is important in Poland and questioning superiors is viewed negatively. You might question or criticise something or someone quietly, to yourself, but you should not state it. In many organisations, there is neither the time nor the place for constructive criticism.

Poland is not a feedback-giving culture.





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