Cultural top tips for UK businesses working with South Korea
At the initial stages of conducting business in South Korea, formality and protocol are equally as important as content.

Most foreign visitors are treated with a great deal of respect and politeness, which should in turn be reciprocated. This means making sure to remember people's names and titles.

At events such as presentations or meetings, expect a seating plan, name cards and formal introductions. Formality also extends to 'after-hours' events such as dinners and drinks. At times these events may seem 'overly-prepared' to the foreign visitor, but it is important to keep to the pre-arranged schedule as diversion from it will cause offence.

Expect formality and organisation

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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.
Build trust by appreciating Korean history, culture and language

Koreans are very proud of their history, heritage, culture and language and having some knowledge of these will go a long way to earning trust.

It is likely that during a business visit there will be some mention of cultural aspects or an invitation to try something typically ‘Korean’.

Demonstrating that you know something about what your host is offering will be held in very high regard.

In addition, learning just a few of the most commonly used phrases in Korean will go a long way to helping you become ‘liked’ which is essential to doing business in Korea.

Learn how to show respect

The Korean language is designed to show respect and ‘honorific’ words and phrases are commonplace.

In business situations, it is important to show this respect by always using titles unless explicitly instructed to do otherwise.

Respect also applies to the use of gesture as well. Whilst Koreans have adopted the handshake as an introductory gesture it is not used in all situations and should be accompanied by a small bow.

Koreans tend to be understated in the use of hand gestures and body language to illustrate points and may find excessive use of these strange. Nonetheless, if you have gained the trust of a business partner, he/she can become very tactile. This only applies between colleagues of the same sex. Expect your Korean counterpart to put his/her arm around you or gently guide you from the elbow.
4 Expect people say and ask what they want

Despite the prevailing stereotype, Koreans are not shy when it comes to giving opinions. They tend to be direct in saying what they think or feel. In addition they are likely to ask their guests plenty of personal questions. These should be asked as well as answered. By finding out about your host’s age, academic background and work experience, you are not only showing you are interested in them, you are also finding out about their place in society. Don’t panic when these questions are then turned on you! However, don’t boast when responding.

Make sure you ask personal questions in a tactful way and preferably on a one-to-one basis rather than in a group.

It is also helpful to remember that if the person doesn’t want to answer, your questions will be met with a period of silence or umming and ahhing. If this is the case, then make sure to move the conversation on as quickly as possible.

5 Respect hierarchy and bureaucracy

Just as it is important to show individual respect, it is important to show respect for the internal operations of any company you may work with and not be judgemental at the initial stage.

Whilst to some outsiders the level of bureaucracy and processes within Korean companies seems unnecessarily high, it is important to remember that specific roles and processes as well as a clear hierarchy is what makes most Korean people comfortable in their work.

Most importantly, find out who the decision-makers are and respect the rules of hierarchy. It is a slight on any boss to be undermined, even privately.
Be aware of taboo topics

Koreans will talk about most topics including the history of the Koreas and current political troubles. However, when talking about this area and society in South Korea in general it is essential not to come across as judgemental or express negative attitudes to life in Korea. Let your host do the denigrating if there is any to be done.

There are some topics which should not be mentioned and these include the era of Japanese Occupation (1910-1945) and homosexuality among others. Korea is essentially a conservative society when it comes to sexuality.

Be prepared for etiquette around the drinking culture

There is a strong team ethic in Korean workplaces which extends to ‘after-hours’ meals and drinks.

In some cases, team members will be expected to have dinner out with their teams as many as three times a week. The majority of the time, dinner will be accompanied with drinks, including Korean beer and a spirit called ‘soju’. Internal employees are expected to do as the boss says in these situations, however, foreign guests will have more leeway and won’t be expected to drink if he/she doesn’t want to.

Although having drinks out is common, getting drunk is frowned upon and there should be no mention of any person’s (possibly drunken) behaviour during working hours.

When in a drinking environment, it is usually the case that you do not pour your own drink. Glasses and bottles should be held with two hands when receiving and giving top-ups.

When people offer a ‘cheers’ it is important not to make eye contact as this will seem strange to most Koreans and possibly confrontational.
Remember that appearance is important

When in public you’ll notice that people take great pride in their appearance. You’ll rarely see a woman without immaculate hair and make-up and the same applies (if a little more loosely) to men. In this regard, the most important aspect is cleanliness and giving the impression of being clean.

Furthermore, you can never be too formally dressed. In the higher echelons of management, most Korean men will wear a suit and tie and women will be similarly attired.

Know who you’re doing business with

As well as doing your homework about the country of South Korea, your hosts will expect you to have extensive knowledge of their operation.

Around the world we use the phrase ‘Google’ someone (look them up on the search engine Google), in Korea the search engine ‘Naver’ is predominant. So, before you arrive, ‘Naver’ the history and current operations of your business partner.

History and current hierarchy are things that are very important to know.
Expect gender divisions in business

Although things are changing, Korean society and positions of power are still dominated by older men with strong academic backgrounds. Women, more often than not, take administrative and support roles.