



Getting to know your new team

The toughest part of starting any new job or project is establishing good working relationships with other members of the team. This can be especially difficult for Expats who are not only adapting to new responsibilities, processes and procedures, but also to cultural differences – differences that often present challenges. These include:

- **Communication styles.** Different ways of communicating can cause misunderstandings and even conflict. For example, some cultures consider it more efficient to be direct, even blunt in their business communications. Even though no insult is intended, people from other countries or cultures may be offended. In many Asian countries, people may seem intentionally vague or unclear to a Westerner. However, they may be simply ‘saving face’ – avoiding causing you or themselves discomfort or embarrassment at any cost.
- **Non-verbal communication.** Ninety-three percent of communication is non-verbal. Understanding the importance of silences, gestures and body language is vital in establishing any relationship. Even small things like eye contact and smiling differ from culture to culture. North Americans make eye contact to signal respect and attention and smile to indicate their approachability. By contrast, in some cultures, making eye contact may be considered disrespectful and people may react defensively when someone they don't know smiles at them.

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- **Concepts of time.** Time is perceived differently across the world. Many cultures view time in a linear way — people prefer to work on a single task before beginning another and place great value on punctuality and keeping to schedules. In other cultures, especially in Latin America, time is viewed as more of a circle, with past, present and future all interrelated. As a result, timeframes are more fluid and there is less division between work and personal activities.
- **Attitudes to work.** In individualist cultures like the U.S.A., employees feel free to present their ideas, debate issues in meetings, and ask for more information. Speaking up is not only encouraged, it's expected. The opposite is true in collectivist cultures such as the Chinese culture, where speaking up can be perceived as disrespectful, insubordinate, rude, and causing a loss of face for the supervisor or manager.

Expats need more than professional expertise, they require cultural dexterity – the ability to adapt their communication and working styles to align with those of their new colleagues and become part of the team.

Becoming part of the team

The impression we make during the first weeks with a new employer or team is the one that will stay with us for months, even years. Here are some tips to make the appropriate first impression while getting to know people.

- **Jump in.** In certain cultures, socializing after hours is an important part of doing business and turning down invitations can be interpreted as rude. In some Asian countries, karaoke is popular. Many Westerners find the idea of singing in public extremely embarrassing - but it's about being a good sport rather than being on key.

Participating in local holidays, festivals, and traditions also shows you're embracing your host country and respecting its culture. Get out and enjoy fireworks during Diwali, give a traditional greeting during Eid-al-fitr, exchange small gifts during Christmas or Hanukkah or wear red on Chinese New Year!

- **Show an interest in news and events.** It's helpful to understand what local, national, and international issues most concern your coworkers — but be careful offering your opinions. Your views may be unwelcome and unintentionally alienate you. If you're asked your views, try to change the subject diplomatically. Discussing sports is always a good option.
- **Learn about local and national sports.** What is the national sports passion? Soccer? Cricket? Table Tennis? Polo? Who are some of the county's sport heroes? No matter where you live and work, most people are passionate about their local sports teams and heroes.

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- **Language.** You may speak the local language well, but what about local idioms and slang? Even English varies drastically from country to country, so brush up on the local expressions.
- **Make a meal of it.** One of the most enjoyable ways to build rapport with your coworkers is over a meal at local restaurants and food stalls. Having an open mind towards trying local dishes shows respect. Be adventurous and let people know if you can't eat certain dishes for medical, ethical or religious reasons.

For more information on ways to get to know people in a new country, contact your Employee Assistance Program.

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