



INTERNATIONAL PHONE & BUSINESS ETIQUETTE GUIDE

Travis May is the founder and CEO of TollFreeForwarding.com. With a degree in computer science and the support of a dedicated team of experts, Travis helps over 25,000 customers in 125 countries to expand internationally into new markets with virtual numbers.

We help thousands of our customers deal with just some of the challenges that face them when expanding into new markets. We can help businesses a lot by offering them and their customers an effective and economical avenue of communication. However, on a cultural level there are many considerations businesses should make when they're working with different business cultures. So, we've spoken to a selection of business experts from around the world to get some advice on international business etiquette.



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Could you describe an occasion where miscommunication or confusion has occurred in a professional environment due to cultural differences?

An engineer from the UAE arrived at a corporate headquarters in a large US mid-western city. He had regularly hosted visitors from the US in the UAE, picking them up at the airport, seeing them to their hotel, taking them to dinner and showing them cultural sites. Now he was arriving for the first time in the US, and he had meetings scheduled with all his colleagues.

At the airport, he waited, expecting someone to pick him up on a Sunday afternoon. But no one arrived. He called the cell phones of his colleagues, but none answered. “Was this a holiday?” In the UAE it’s another working day. Eventually he got a text that said, “Take an airport shuttle and we’ll see you at the office tomorrow.” He did not even know where the office was so he took a taxi, but even then, he was forced to sit in the foyer for 15 minutes before his host arrived as an escort.

Is there anything that would be considered polite or even please businesspeople you work with in other cultures?

In Italy and France work can be presented in informal settings, such as lunch or dinner. But in Austria, business is separated from social activities.

Bring a special gift, although it should not be extravagant enough to be seen as a bribe. Something from your home or region can be very meaningful. For example, coming from the western US, I often bring a small piece of Native American art. My colleague from Detroit brings a high-end model car. My friend from Australia brings a neck tie or scarf with patterns from the Great Barrier Reef.

What actions would be considered rude in other cultures in a professional environment?

The list is so very long...

In Italy and France it is rude to refuse food. In Brazil it is rude to be too structured, while in Austria the opposite is true. Again, in Brazil silence can be construed as rude or awkward, while In Russia, silence is expected.

In the UAE, get off the airplane dressed for business and ready to be greeted. People expect business people to dress like business people. Getting off the plane in a tee shirt and blue jeans is an insult to your host.

How is the use of technology in business situations (e.g. smartphones) viewed?

One of the best things you can do is translate PowerPoint presentations to native language. People might speak English, but they need something familiar to keep up.

How would native people view people from other countries attempting to converse in the local language?

Do not talk louder if you are not being understood. Turning the volume up is considered hostile by most cultures. If you are having difficulty being understood, slow down.

Could you describe an occasion where cultures have clashed over the phone?

The hardest thing about communicating over the telephone is when English is a second language. For most, email is better because they can read and reread until they fully understand.

How important is understanding the culture you are doing business in?

There is nothing more potentially perilous or rewarding than building a bridge or opportunity with someone who is different. If you do the hard work of learning their way, communicating your way, then finding a third way that works for both of you, your colleagues will become friends and your friends will become dear friends.

What advice would you give to businesspeople about etiquette in other cultures?

In Italy, France, Brazil and South Africa handshakes and hugs are OK. But in Austria, UAE and Japan, never hug.

My Austrian colleague who I had been communicating with for 8 months on email, met me in Vienna at the airport. We were already friends and so I hugged him. But I did not stop there. I hugged his wife. It was like the air went out of the room. After a few days, I asked him about my greeting. He said, "I hug my mother. My wife hugs her father. We do not hug friends."

Would local people understand common buzzwords and UK/US phrases or are these best avoided?

Sports metaphors are the worst, e.g.:

- *That's a sticky wicket (cricket)*
- *Dive right in (Swimming)*
- *Home run (Baseball)*
- *Slam dunk (Basketball)*
- *It's fourth-and-goal (American Football)*
- *Stay in your lane (Track)*
- *You are underwater (Diving)*
- *You fumbled the ball (American Football)*
- *Throw a Hail Mary (American Football)*
- *You dropped the ball (Baseball)*
- *You are out of bounds (Multiple sports)*
- *You are off base (Baseball)*

What do these mean to people who have never played the game? Or watched the game? Or even know about the game?

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Could you describe an occasion where miscommunication or confusion has occurred in a professional environment due to cultural differences?

Gift giving internationally. Years ago, I was planning a trade mission to China for the Mayor of San Francisco, Willie Brown. There was some confusion on our gift choices, and even though we worked with the local consulate we purchased gifts that would have been an insult in their country. Luckily, we found this out before the fact. Crisis averted!

Is there anything that would be considered polite or even please businesspeople you work with in other countries?

'Appropriate' is my word of choice, especially in Japan where hierarchy is key. It is always correct to show your business cards facing out in their language first. Always have the cards translated in both languages. They will want to meet with the most important person first. Like I said, hierarchy.

What actions would be considered rude in other cultures in a professional environment?

In countries like China, relationships first need to be nurtured in order to do business. When you rush them in the decision-making process to "sign on the dotted line", that's when the problems begin. Not every country is in a hurry like America.

How is the use of technology in business situations (e.g. smartphones) viewed?

I find that the rule is the same across the board. In terms of everyone's favorite cell phone, put it to rest while in a meeting. That is not to say you can't use it to schedule a meeting while in the boardroom, but put it on vibrate and don't use it for texting or phone calls.

How would native people view people from other countries attempting to converse in the local language?

The French may look upon it funny and that comes from first-hand experience, but we all get brownie points for trying to speak other languages, at least the basics such as please, thank you, where is the train station, etc.

Could you describe an occasion where cultures have clashed over the phone?

Nonverbal communication can be quite tough when you don't see face to face. Quite a bit can be you misinterpreted over the phone or on email for that matter.

What advice could you give to people looking to get a job in a new country?

When in Rome. No matter which country you're going to visit, you should learn all you can about the business sector. Such as will an interpreter will be needed; meeting protocol; safe topic of discussion; cuisine and customs; gift giving and dress. The list is endless.

How important understands the culture you are doing business in?

Learning about your region of business is so important. It's like going to sit for an exam and not knowing any of the questions? If you want to be successful, do your homework and learn about your host country and company. It's so easy on the web.

What advice would you give to businesspeople about etiquette in other cultures?

Take the time to do your homework and learn key words or phrases. There are 1000s of books out there not to mention the internet.

Would local people understand common buzzwords and UK/US phrases or are these best avoided?

Avoid using US slang that no one understands at home let alone abroad. Some examples are cool; like; for real; cold shoulder; lighten up; screw up.

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Could you describe an occasion where miscommunication or confusion has occurred in a professional environment due to cultural differences with residents of another country?

There are, in fact, many instances where miscommunications commonly happen. For example, comfort zone plays a crucial part. While a casual hug, an arm around a shoulder or peck on the cheek is common in the metropolitan cities, things can get uncomfortable or awkward, especially with the elderly or females. A casual touch may come across as invading the private space. Another example could be in some formal meetings, it may seem disrespectful to address someone by the first name. Affixing a title before the name is suggested. The official language in India is English, but it's the British English. So, don't be surprised to hear "lift" instead of "elevator" or "tiffin" instead of "lunch box", etc. While there are many examples, these are merely suggestions. One should not go by the book and try to adapt to according to the situation.

Is there anything that would be considered polite or even please businesspeople in India?

If you're at a business lunch, and see that others are eating with their hands, don't feel left out. It's just the tradition in India to eat with hands. When you are invited for a family dinner, then it is considered a good etiquette to give a present, such as flowers or box of chocolates, etc. Also, if you are invited to a family home, ask first before entering the place, if you should take off the shoes. At a business meeting, exchanging business cards is a part of the etiquette when doing business in India.

What actions would be considered rude or offend someone in India in a professional environment?

As mentioned earlier, if eating with hand, avoid using the left hand, even if you are left-handed. If your business counterpart in India is a female, then don't extend the hand for a handshake. It's sometimes considered impolite. Instead, wait for them and then follow suit. Wearing too revealing clothes may be seen as offensive in the non-metropolitan parts of India. If you wish to smoke, then you should ask the people you're sitting with if they are okay with smoking.

How is the use of technology in business situations (e.g. smartphones) viewed?

Most of the Indian businesses are adopting technology into their day-to-day operations, let alone the meetings. So, you can consider using your laptop, tablet or phone to present your ideas in the meetings. But, have some patience if the Internet connectivity is not so fast. In the rural areas or suburban towns, there are occasional power outages. So, if that happens during your business meeting, then you should have some patience.

How would native Indians view people from other countries attempting to converse in the local language?

India has 22 official languages. But, there are over 1600 dialects all around the country. Even, the national language, Hindi, is spoken differently in different parts of the country. So, while they will appreciate you trying to converse with them in the local language, be very careful and ensure that you know each word you are saying. Otherwise, you run the risk of offending them by saying something which has a whole different meaning than what you thought.

Could you describe an occasion where cultures may or could clash over the phone in India?

One common example I can think of is when someone tries to crack a joke or uses slang to lighten up the conversation while on call with an Indian businessman, it may have a different meaning in the Indian language. Or if they are not familiar with the slang, then it may create an uncomfortable silence instead of laughter.

What advice could you give to people from overseas looking to get a job or work in India?

Firstly, it is important that you research thoroughly. Be sure of the economic, political and cultural backdrops. If you have a place you would prefer to live in India, do a complete study of that place. Building a good network helps in getting a job or work easily in India. Other than those, consider all the practicalities, such as whether you are personally and psychologically ready to move to India and live there for a considerable amount of time.

What's the biggest difference between the way you work in India compared to working in the US or UK?

Businesses in India operate in a very formal and orderly manner, with the exception of the metropolitan cities. So, every task goes through a formal process and chain of authority. It's important to understand their attitude toward authority. While punctuality is followed in business meetings at most places in India, in some rural parts, it may be considered 'okay' to arrive a little late in the meeting. And as far as the communication practices are concerned in a business environment, Indians prefer indirect, high context interactions.

How important is understanding the local culture when doing business in India?

As explained before, it is very important to understand the local culture when doing business in India. A nod to the local business etiquette is important for establishing a rapport. For example, be punctual at meetings and don't forget to greet the seniors and females first. Expect to start your interactions with small talk. Being patient is showing respect to others. If you are offered tea or coffee with milk, then you should take it. Considered replacing your direct "NOs" with "I will consider it and get back to you."

Would Indians understand common buzzwords and UK/US phrases or are these best avoided?

It depends upon the situation really. If you are dealing with an MNC or an agency, feel free to use the buzzwords and slang or phrases. So, you should really gauge your audience to decide whether or not you should use buzzwords in India. When in doubt, it's best to avoid

them.

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Could you describe an occasion where miscommunication or confusion has occurred in a professional environment due to cultural differences?

France

I see a lot of miscommunications stemming from ‘false friends’ in the language (i.e. words that look similar but have different meanings). For example, an American client who was sick of her French counterparts always demanding everything was surprised to learn that in French, ‘demander’ is the verb to ask for and it doesn’t mean ‘to demand’! Other French-English examples that trip people up are ‘actuellement’, which means currently (not actually) or ‘un délai’, which means lead time (not a delay).

Mexico

Sometimes there is an issue with false friends. One notable one is ‘discutir’ in Spanish, which has a negative, argumentative connotation versus the idea of to discuss in English. This can be challenging in a professional environment when an English speaker says they want to discuss something, and a Mexican speaker of Spanish interprets it confrontationally. (This of course depends on the level of English that the speaker has but I have seen it happen a lot!)

A few years ago, I was leading a cultural training for a group of Mexicans. Typically, one of the first questions that I ask is, “What would success look like?” to try to get to the root of what a successful training would look like for the group. This group started listing all sorts of PERSONAL success factors related to their families, their children, etc. I had to bring it back to the professional point, but it was a good reminder (especially for this New Yorker!) that even in a professional setting, people may see beyond work when they think about success.

Is there anything that would be considered polite or even please businesspeople you work with in other countries?

Brazil

Be simpático. Relationship building in general is an extremely important part of Brazilian culture. How does one do this? Start by being ‘simpático’, a word with no exact English translation but which roughly means someone who is friendly, nice, agreeable, good-natured, fun, and pleasant. Good opportunities to build relationships include having a ‘cafezinho’ (small coffee) and taking your ‘hora do almoço’ (an actual lunch hour) with colleagues or friends.

Russia

Russians are open to learning. Many expats come over with the attitude that they know everything better than the Russians. Russian colleagues like that you bring knowledge and skills and want to learn,

they just don't like an air of superiority. (Who does?!) The best way to transfer knowledge is to teach through the lens of 'why.' Russians want to understand, "Why me?" and "Why does it matter in this context?" And since the spoken word is never trusted, rely heavily on follow-up in writing. **Follow the leader.** As a leader in Russia, the perception is that you are getting paid to make decisions so subordinates will often come to you looking for solutions rather than taking initiative on their own. When a new leader comes on the scene, the first question many people will ask themselves is if the person is bringing harm to the team or organization. Build trust and acceptance by getting to know more about who your colleagues are as people. In addition to general conversation (avoid finances, politics, and religion), a good way to do this is by keeping track of important events in people's lives (e.g. weddings, birthdays, first days of school for children, even buying a new car) and acknowledging them appropriately.

France

Err on the side of (French) formality. French formality means dressing the part for business, using titles (Madame/Monsieur) rather than first names in the beginning of a relationship, and sticking to the formal 'vous' instead of the informal 'tu' if you speak French, at least until your colleague switches to the informal. What may surprise people is that 'formality' does not necessarily mean political correctness. It tends to be more readily acceptable to make jokes related to sex or ethnicity, and to give compliments to colleagues of the opposite sex on clothing or appearance.

Know your stuff and be prepared to defend it. It has been said that the French ask questions to make sure that other people know the answers. Approximate answers based in part on hunches and experience rarely suffice. French school systems place a heavy emphasis on reasoning through deductive logic (building from the general premises to the specific conclusions) rather than inductive logic (building from specific observations to general conclusions). Sometimes in France, when you need to convince others, it's more important that it works in theory rather than in practice!

South Africa

Appreciate the differences among different cultural groups and adjust accordingly. It is very important to be able to show flexibility in communication styles when working among different populations in South Africa. White South Africans tend to favor an informal, direct style that gets down to business quickly. On the other hand, Black South Africans tend to spend more time building relationships and communicate in a more indirect style that infers meanings through gestures and eye contact in addition to words. When building relationships, you can ask and expect to be asked personal questions. For example, consider asking someone, "What's your mother tongue?", "What was it like for you growing up?", and "How is it different now?"

What actions would be considered rude in other cultures in a professional environment?

Russia

How Are You? (Or Not.) In many cultures, "How are you?" is a rhetorical question that serves as a generic greeting for friends and strangers alike, and barely requires a reply. In Russia, this is a real question intended only for those you actually know and care about, so don't ask the question unless you have at least 20 seconds for a reply!

Not acknowledging birthdays. It's customary for subordinates to bring cake or candy to the office for their own birthdays. While the team may collect money for a gift, it's critical for the boss to wish a

personal happy birthday to the employee. Make it one of the first orders of business to mark the birthdays of colleagues, and more importantly subordinates, on your calendar!

France

No news is good news. While some cultures favor frequent praise and compliments (e.g. "good job", "thanks so much", "nice work"), in France less is generally more. Feedback from superiors tends to be less frequent and more formal. The assumption is that you are in your position because you are capable of doing your job. Layering on the positive feedback runs the risk of sounding condescending. On the flip side, when you are complimented on your work, it is truly a job well done.

Mexico

Ignoring Mother's Day. Mother's Day in Mexico, which is always on May 10th, is a serious holiday. When it falls on a weekday, most mothers do not go to work. Employers often allow people to take the day off, or work a half day to be able to go see their mothers, share a big meal, and bring flowers, cards, and gifts. Some may even hire mariachi bands to deliver a serenata early in the morning.

How would native people view people from other countries attempting to converse in the local language?

Generally speaking, I can't think of a culture where the effort to converse in the local language is not appreciated at a minimum. Showing effort and interest can go a long way. That being said:

- 1. Cultures hold different standards for what constitutes "fluency". The French, for example, have high standards when it comes to language and often classify their abilities as "intermediate" whereas Americans with an equivalent level of French would say they are "fluent".*
- 2. It's all relative and depends where you're coming from, but some languages are less expected to be mastered than others. An American going to Mexico might be expected to have some basic language knowledge (since the countries share a border), whereas an American going the UAE would likely not be expected to speak/read/write Arabic (although learning the basics would be highly appreciated!)*

*On the note of language, in many cases it's also important to simply be aware of what languages are spoken in a country. **South Africa** comes to mind here as there are 11 official languages to which the state guarantees equal status. The languages are Zulu, Xhosa, Afrikaans, Pedi (Northern Sotho), Sotho, English, Tswana, Tsonga, Swazi, Venda, and Ndebele. English is the mother tongue of only 9.6% of the population according to the 2011 census! This surprises many people.*

What advice could you give to people looking to get a job in a new country?

Similar to the advice I wrote for one of the questions below, do your homework. And if you're not familiar with the country, hire a local career or executive coach who can guide you and who has experience in how cultural differences manifest themselves in the job search process. It's not simply about reformatting resumes, cover letters, and LinkedIn profiles to match local norms, although those are all important. It's also about how you communicate with employers during the interview process from initial contact to final negotiations. In some cultures, you really need to (over)sell yourself and your skills (like in the US) and in others, modesty will be received more favourably (like in the UK). In some cultures,

it's experience over education (like in the US), and in others it's more education over experience (like in France). It's one thing to know things like this in theory, it's another to be able to know how to implement them appropriately and in your favour when faced with a potential employer.

What's the biggest difference between the way you work at home, compared to working in other cultures?

Coming from a US American perspective, probably the importance of relationship building and the way we build relationships. On a spectrum from interest-based, transactional relationships to highly interpersonal relationships, the US is one of the most transactional out there. Almost all other cultures place more importance (ranging from slightly more to a lot more) on developing a relationship before engaging in business. You can read more about [this here](#).

How important is understanding the culture you are doing business in?

Very important! The German author Hans Magnus Enzensberger said, "Culture is a little like dropping an Alka-Seltzer into a glass - you don't see it, but somehow it does something." CULTURE MATTERS. It's important to be mindful that culture is complex and there are usually many layers of culture operating at the same time: national culture of course, but also regional culture, organizational culture, generational culture, and individual personality. Successful businesspeople unravel this web of factors to see which is influencing a situation most.

What advice would you give to businesspeople about etiquette in other cultures?

Aside from the tips already mentioned, do your homework (speak to other expats and locals, do research, take a training, engage in coaching) to get ready for what you cannot possibly expect or know until you are there. In some ways, it's almost like getting married...you don't know what to expect until you are in it...and then you're behind the learning curve and experiencing stress. It's harder to learn and grow while experiencing stress than it is to engage in education prior to the event.

Would local people understand common buzzwords and UK/US phrases or are these best avoided?

A lot of business jargon is global, but one area that I find sometimes poses challenges are sports idioms, which we use a lot in the US (e.g. Monday morning quarterback, full court press, rain check, ballpark figure). Or a South African example of how "English to English" can sometimes be confusing: "to pitch up" = "to arrive". Also, in South Africa, it is perfectly acceptable to use the word "coloured", which can make some cultures uncomfortable.

Margo Schlossberg attended the Monterrey Institute of International Studies where she received her MBA in international marketing with a focus on Southeast Asia. Following suit, Ms. Schlossberg worked with the American Chamber of Commerce in Jakarta, Indonesia and later with a multinational shipping company as a marketing manager.



Could you describe an occasion where miscommunication or confusion has occurred in a professional environment due to cultural differences in Indonesia?

I remember that it was a case of the Indonesians I was managing being more literal than what I was saying. We were working on a charity project and helping to create artwork and signs and what I asked for which seemed very clear to me was grossly misinterpreted when I received the artwork because I had not said exactly to the artist “please first do x, then do y, then do z”. As an American it seemed apparent you do these things and these comprised a sort of a step 1 but we were not on the same page here and I did not get what I was looking for (although I learned how to better communicate and did get what I wanted eventually.) The other thing I had trouble with was respecting the culture. I knew that I had to let my staff pray, but to be honest, I think sometimes they took advantage of me in the beginning and their prayer times were lengthened dramatically because I didn’t know. You want to, of course, be respectful of the culture and the religion but not get taken advantage of either.

Is there anything that would be considered polite or even please businesspeople you work with in Indonesia?

Business people in Indonesia, in my experience, really appreciate when you take the time to learn a little bit about the language and culture. When you show an appreciation for their culture and show that you are happy to be working there. These things seem basic but I can say that I have seen expatriates who did not do things like this and you could read from the body language of those they were speaking with that they were not as comfortable with the meeting/negotiation. In countries, like Indonesia that have had a long and somewhat arduous political history it is best not to discuss those things unless they are for some reason brought up first. Indonesians like to talk about food and what your experiences are with the local food and what you enjoyed. It’s nice neutral territory but something that they take pride in.

What actions would be considered rude in Indonesia in a professional environment?

Going directly into the numbers or the details without asking someone how they are, is considered rude. The good ole boy type of attitude which I have also seen, does not go over very well. (back slapping etc.) Pointing is considered rude and generally, as in most of Asia, if you can remember to accept things with two hands that is well-received although not mandatory. The Indonesians that I have seen do not like yelling. I had an English supervisor that was very disciplinarian and would yell a lot. That was not an effective management technique in Indonesia. The inclusion type management style or asking open-ended questions can be difficult because it is a very literal culture. For example, sometimes saying things like “what do you think?” are not as easy to get answers from as asking more specific pointed questions. I had this problem when I tried to include my staff on decision-making tasks.

How is use of technology in business meetings or when conducting business viewed in Indonesia?

Indonesians have a very positive view of technology, especially younger Indonesians, same as every culture. I met a lot of Indonesians that were just amazing with graphics, design, video and things of that nature. Still, and really this is not much different than any other country, when dealing with older bureaucrats I think face to face is still better sharing a meal/coffee. Using things like Skype I don't think would be an issue for meetings.

How would native Indonesians view people from other countries attempting to converse in the local language?

I think they would love it and get a kick out of it even if the language were not exactly correct. Sometimes, because it is such a literal culture there may be things that lend themselves to not being understood entirely so in that case it may be necessary to switch to English. I believe just making that attempt is extremely well received.

Could you describe an occasion where cultures may or could have clashed over the phone in Indonesia?

I think again, this goes back to the very hard type negotiation or with very irate angry behaviour. This does not work in Indonesia and my experience was always that if there was a very big issue it was best to resolve it over a meal or coffee or drinks to de-escalate.

What advice could you give to people looking to get a job in Indonesia?

I suggest using the American or British or other (Dutch/German) Chamber of Commerce. They have established relationships with companies operating in the region and have their finger on the pulse of what's going on both with companies as well as with industry sectors. When I first went to Asia, I worked as an intern and wrote position papers in Jakarta and best prospects for American exports in Malaysia. Read these things and talk to the people who wrote them if you can. Get on a committee or attend a meeting in the industry sector that is of interest.

What's the biggest difference between the way you work at home, compared to working in Indonesia?

The traffic is bad where I am from in the states but the traffic is just beastly in a lot of countries in Asia. Allocating that extra time to your day or if you have a driver or if you are driving yourself- being able to use that time productively. Things like flooding can affect commutes. You are sharing the road with all types of vehicles which makes getting around a much different experience. I travelled a lot for meetings and learning to understand the traffic was useful.

How important is understanding the local culture when doing business in Indonesia?

I think it is extremely important because things that are happening, for instance, in the mining and the oil and gas sectors are very much affected by culture and history. Understanding the culture serves as a doorway to beginning a conversation, or a negotiation I really felt it was paramount.

What advice would you give to businesspeople about etiquette in Indonesia?

Build long-term relationships and do the things that show you are in it for the long-term and plan to show integrity.

Would local people understand common buzzwords and UK/US phrases or are these best avoided?

Indonesians have access to plenty of US/UK movies, videos, etc. so they know a lot of the buzz words but I still would try to converse in a way that doesn't leave a lot of room for incorrect interpretation. Use few abstract expressions, clear sentences, clear questions and repeat back answers to make sure that you are hearing what is being said and understanding it correctly.