

BUSINESS ETIQUETTES AND CUSTOMS



JAPAN

WORKING HOURS

- Japan has some of the longest working hours in the world.
- According to the Japanese Labour Law, only 8 hours a day, or 40 hours a week, is allowed but employees can work overtime up to 45 hours a month or 360 hours a year generally with the labour and management agreement called "Sabu-Roku Kyotei" (36協定).
- The government amended the labour law to put a limit on overtime in 2018. This limitation comes into effect on April 2019.

PUNCTUALITY

- Timeliness.

BUSINESS MEETINGS

- The Japanese believe strongly in 'no hidden surprises' and are committed to a very high degree of predictability and consistent reliability (not just reliability). Being organized and efficient, and adherence to deadlines (and a host of other similar virtues) are considered a way of life in Japan.
- In keeping with the "no surprises" approach, the Japanese ensure that the agenda is agreed upon well in advance and all the necessary people from their side are invited and duly briefed. The Japanese want to make it absolutely certain that nothing discussed at the meeting, whether of importance or not, is missed or forgotten. The Japanese interpret not taking notes or recording dates and schedules as a sign of "lack of seriousness." This will demonstrate the "symbolic" commitment to the relationship. To the Japanese, an eye for detail and perceived importance towards quality are important evaluation criteria before entering into a partnership.
- Once a contract has been finalised, the Japanese expect certain minimum quality standards from the vendor. This quality need not necessarily have to be the best in the world, but it should be of mutually acceptable standards.
- During the pre-sales phase, the Japanese would always take great pains to define this. Let us assume that this contracted quality is 70% of "best available

quality." The Japanese would expect this benchmarked quality "time after time -- every time" and any reduction in quality below this accepted baseline is considered a major deviation.

- A better quality level will be considered an improvement and highly appreciated, but the emphasis here is again on "no surprises ever." The focus is on consistent and reliable delivery of agreed quality all the time



BUSINESS MEALS

- Silence speaks loudly about wisdom and emotional self-control. A more introverted, formal approach, especially at the beginning of a business relationship, is likely to be better received when doing business in Japan. Business is often conducted over drinks in Japan.
- Sessions can get rather rowdy but still follow some etiquette. If you are invited out for drinks, accept the invitation. Not only will you experience an interesting bit of the culture, knowing how to conduct yourself could lead to a successful deal.
- If invited to dinner in Japan, you should learn a few phrases in Japanese to show your host respect. Key phrases are 'itadakimasu' at the beginning and 'goschisousama deshita' at the termination of a meal.
- The word to use when toasting is 'kampai' and when drinking, the glass is never left unfilled. Drinking is viewed as a way to relieve the stress that comes with doing business and is an important part of networking. You should never pour yourself a drink; this is a pleasure exclusively reserved for your host. While eating, you should slurp your noodles. This will demonstrate that you are enjoying your food.
- Feel free to use this time to get to know your host. Communication is very unemotional, but very direct. The Japanese strive to maximize business effectiveness and pursue topics that can help them better assess a situation or an individual. Dinnertime is acceptable for business discussion.
- Although they are direct, the Japanese are very comfortable with silence and use it often in conversation. You must learn to interpret these signals and not mistake them for insecurity.
- Dinners are usually held after business hours at bars, restaurants, or "hostess bars." The latter are reserved exclusively for businessmen, and women should not attend. If invited out, you should allow your host to pay. Reciprocation of this gesture is expected as well.

GIFTS AND PRESENTS

- Gift-giving is an important part of Japanese business protocol. Moreover, gifts are exchanged among colleagues on July 15 and in mid-December to commemorate midyear and the year's end respectively.
- It is a good policy to bring an assortment of gifts for your trip. This way, if you are unexpectedly presented with a gift, you will be able to reciprocate. The emphasis in Japanese business culture is on the ritual of gift-giving, rather than the gift itself. For this reason, you may receive a gift that seems too modest, or conversely, extravagant.
- An expensive gift will not be perceived as a bribe.
- The best time to present a gift is toward the end of your visit. You can discreetly approach the recipient, indicating that you have a small gift.
- Avoid giving a gift early in a relationship or at any conspicuous moment. – Gifts are opened in private to avoid the 'loss of face' of a poor choice.
- Flowers are also often to be gifted in several cases, such as to celebrate, to express sympathy for patients or to express condolence.
- There are some taboos in gifting flowers so that you should ask florists for advice when you choose flowers. In general, Chrysanthemum ("Kiku" in Japanese) and lotus are avoided since they are associated with funerals.
- Also, it is said that white flowers of any kind should be avoided for the similar reason. There is also a superstition that potted plants are not appropriate to gift to a person in hospital since they encourage sickness.
- The number of four and nine are associated with death and pain so that giving four or nine of anything should be avoided.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

- In Japan, the share of employees working very long hours is more than the OECD average of 13%. In Japan, full-time workers devote 62% of their day on average, or nearly 14.9 hours, to personal care (eating, sleeping, etc.) and leisure (socialising with friends and family, hobbies, games, computer and television use, etc.) – slightly less than the OECD average of 15 hours.
- Parents in Japan find it difficult to combine work and family commitments. Workplace practices, private costs (housing and juku), and social norms put pressure on young people. (OECD Better life Index 2018).

BUSINESS CLOTHING

- Japanese business professionals are often extremely formal in their business attire. When approaching a meeting with Japanese clients, not only are Japanese business cards highly important, but it is also best to air on the side of caution with conservative apparel. The Japanese place a keen importance on the detail and sophistication of business clothing. This can often reflect a status level in the traditionally rigid Japanese business hierarchy. Thus, well-presented conservative business attire will likely exemplify a positive and even higher corporate standing when meeting with Japanese clients.

CONVERSATION

- Enquiring about a person's family, praising the hospitality you're receiving, and Japanese history, are good conversation topics.
- You may be asked personal questions regarding your salary, education, and family life, but not about money unless you are close (this would otherwise be considered as rude).
- Use apologies where the intention is serious and express gratitude frequently as it is considered polite in Japan. Avoid accusations or direct refusals. World War II and making jokes should be avoided.
- The elderly may not be used to shaking hands but business people are becoming accustomed to international protocol, including shaking hands.
- The elderly, or people in rural areas (e.g. other than Tokyo) may be frightened by large hand gestures since they are not used to this. Never pat a Japanese man on the back or shoulder.
- The American 'OK' sign (thumb and forefinger shaped like an 'O') means 'money' in Japan.
- Laughter will normally indicate embarrassment or distress, rather than amusement.
- Never make derogatory remarks about anyone, including your competitors and own employees.

NATIONAL PUBLIC HOLIDAYS

- Approx. 20 days.

ADDRESSING A PERSON

- Do not address your Japanese counterpart by their first name unless invited to do so. Use the titles 'Mr' or 'Mrs' or add 'san' to their family name; for example, Mr Hiroshima will be "Hiroshima san".
- For Japanese business professionals, a business card (Meishi, pronounced "MAY-SHEE") is an extension of their identity.
- Therefore, it is important to observe some engrained rules of etiquette that signal respect for the person.
- Accept the card with both hands, briefly read it and place it in your business card holder if you are standing
- If you are seated, place it on the table for the duration of the meeting and then place it in your business card holder.

