

# BUSINESS ETIQUETTES AND CUSTOMS



## MYANMAR

### WORKING HOURS

- Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm; some offices open Saturday.

### WORK-LIFE BALANCE

- Myanmar is not known to have particularly happy workers, which could be one of the reasons for its low productivity.
- However, Myanmar has enjoyed a certain increase in material prosperity and it may now be possible to pursue greater employee satisfaction, which may, in return, lead to a higher level of productivity.

### GIFTS AND PRESENTS

- If you receive a gift, make sure to reciprocate the gesture at a later date. While gift giving isn't a necessity on a first business meeting, it is certainly appreciated.
- If you're coming from your home country, a local product is always a good bet. It's hard to go wrong with a box of quality chocolates.
- Gifts need not be overly expensive as it's about the gesture, and something that costs a lot can make the recipient feel uncomfortable receiving it.

### BUSINESS CLOTHING

- The local attire for formal occasions, and that most often used by men in parliament, is a shirt with no collar and a 'longyi' (sarong); sometimes businessmen will also wear western-style tops with a longyi, or a western-style suit.
- Businesswomen also wear longyi, usually with a dress or blouse.
- For foreign businessmen, a suit or smart casual attire – a shirt or polo shirt – with smart trousers, is the norm for most meetings.
- Businesswomen should avoid clothing that shows their shoulders or legs.
- If you do take a suit, bear in mind the extreme temperatures and

humidity you may find in Myanmar (go to climate and weather for more information).

- It is common for locals to take their shoes off when entering an office but foreign visitors do not need to do so.

### PUNCTUALITY

- Myanmar people are not generally very conscious of time.
- Even those who have had a Western education can be quite unconcerned about being late for an appointment.



## BUSINESS MEALS

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- Most business entertaining takes place in hotels and restaurants. Until recently it was illegal for international visitors to be invited into a Myanmar home.
- At business meals, the most junior host will begin serving the guest first. Forks, spoons, or chopsticks may be provided but knives are not. Serving spoons are provided with each dish.
- When eating, it is customary for the elderly to be served first and coughing, sneezing or blowing one's nose at the table are not acceptable. Politely excuse yourself if you feel the need. Also do not use tooth-picks without covering your mouth with your hand or sit at the head of the table unless you are the eldest person there.
- Out of respect, the eldest diners are always served first before the rest join in; even when the elders are absent, the first morsel of rice from the pot is scooped and put aside as an act of respect to one's parents, a custom known as 'u cha' (lit. first serve). When serving a meal, servers may hover about but only the big rice bowl is taken around by them.
- There are too many dishes to serve quickly enough from the side. Each person needs to help themselves to get the dish he or she wants. People tend to concentrate on eating rather than chatting.
- The hostess constantly dishes rice for guests who insist they have had plenty. When finished, each guest may rise and go to the basin and wash with soap.
- Dishes are served simultaneously. A typical meal includes steamed rice as the main dish and accompanying dishes called 'hin', including a curried freshwater fish or dried/salted fish dish, a curried meat or poultry dish instead, a light soup called 'hin gyo', called 'chinyay hin') if sour, and fresh or boiled vegetables to go with a salty dish, almost invariably a curried sauce of pickled fish ('ngapi yayjo') in Lower Burma. Fritters such as gourd or onions in batter as well as fish or dried tofu crackers are extra
- In private, many people may eat with their hands.
- However, in the business environment everyone uses forks, spoons and chopsticks. Chopsticks and Chinese-style spoons are used for noodle dishes, although noodle salads are more likely to be eaten with just a spoon.
- The Burmese eat with their right hand, forming the rice into a small ball with only the fingertips and mixing this with various morsels before popping it into their mouths. Knives and forks are used rarely in homes but will always be provided for guests and are available in restaurants and hotels.
- Drinks are not often served with the meal and, instead, the usual liquid accompaniment is in the form of a light broth or consommé served from a communal bowl.
- Outside of the meal, the Burmese beverage of choice is light green tea, 'yay nway gyan'.

## NATIONAL PUBLIC HOLIDAYS

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- Approx. 25 days

## ADDRESSING A PERSON

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- The Myanmar language has various ways to address people of different ranks, ages, and relationships. There are no surnames or first names to properly address a person by.
- To address a grown person older than oneself, a Burmese person would use 'U' for adult males and 'Daw' for adult females. For addressing younger males or male peers, the titles 'Ko' or 'Maung' are used, and for younger females or female peers, 'Ma' is used. Senior officials and teachers are addressed as 'Saya'.
- This goes back to Buddhist teaching, where parents and teachers are second only to the Three Jewels (ရတနာသုံးပါး yadana thoun ba), together making up the Five Boundless Beneficence (အနန္တတငါးပါး ananda nga ba).
- Using the proper form is an indication to how well-bred and correct the speaker is as well as to the status of the individual being addressed

## BUSINESS MEETINGS

- Business in Myanmar requires patience, as well as a willingness to build friendships and foster trust.
- Attempts to do business in a fast-track way, without sufficient regard for the local culture and procedures, may lead to frustration, and perhaps offence.
- Often a first (or even second) meeting will simply be an opportunity for parties to get to know each other, as a prelude to more serious or in-depth matters being discussed later.
- Furthermore, people do not in general have a strict 'yes is yes' attitude; matters can initially seem ambiguous and you may need to make contact several times before a matter is finalised, which may include dealing with something as simple as admin or paperwork right through to large business deals.
- Of course, this is not always the case, and matters are sometimes concluded more rapidly – but it is an aspect of society that should be born in mind. Myanmar has a deep culture of hospitality and openness – for example, hotels are a relatively modern concept, as traditionally people visiting another part of the country would stay with friends or relatives for as long as they liked.
- This means the exchanging of gifts and favours is ingrained in society, and if a gift is received, it should always be repaid at a later date.
- As in much of Asia, making the right connections can be crucial in networking and securing deals; being introduced by a mutual, trusted contact goes a long way.
- Golf has long been popular in Myanmar, and is an established means of networking.
- You may be expected to remove your shoes when entering an office.
- Consider that 'yes' may not always mean 'yes'. While responses are often made in agreement, they may be saying what they think you want to hear, rather than what they actually mean to avoid friction. You may need to consult them a number of times to finalise a matter. Try and be patient regarding this process.

## CONVERSATION

- Controversial topics in Myanmar include: politics, the former military regime, the Rohingya crisis, ethnic differences, and religious banter.
- This does not mean these subjects cannot be discussed, though, but it is best to wait for them to be brought up by locals as opposed to starting the conversation.
- Myanmar people are very friendly and conversational, but tend to tread carefully around sensitive talking points for good reason.

