

Business etiquette, language and culture

Language

The official languages are English, Mandarin Chinese, Malay and Tamil. English is the official language of government and business.

It is unlikely you will need an interpreter in meetings; however, if you do, choose carefully as your interpreter could be one of your key assets.

Lists of potential interpreters and translators in Singapore can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/singapore-list-of-translators-and-interpreters>. Alternatively, you can check with the DIT team in Singapore at: <https://www.gov.uk/world/organisations/department-for-international-trade-singapore#contact-us>.

[Source – DIT, FCDO]

Religion

The main religions in Singapore are Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. Other religions that are present in Singapore include Taoism, Sikhism, Judaism and Hinduism. There is also a large number of atheists.

[Source – DIT, FCDO]

Hierarchy

In Singaporean business culture, like many Asian cultures, status and hierarchy are important. Decisions and ideas come from the top, down, and the most senior member influences decision making. It is considered disrespectful in Singapore to directly or outwardly criticise senior colleagues.

You should ensure you make contact with the appropriate person from the outset who will be able to influence decision making. Send someone of a similar status to make contact in order to ensure you do not offend your Singaporean counterparts.

[Source – DIT, FCDO]

Meetings and greetings

Visiting and/or business cards are an important part of Singapore's business protocol. Make sure the name faces the recipient and that you hand the card over with both hands. Formal business meetings do not require elaborate bowing, a firm handshake will suffice. When doing business with Singapore, personal relationships and networking are of utmost importance.

At the beginning of any meeting, small talk is common. Questions concerning your family and personal details about yourself may be asked; these are not seen as rude but as a way of getting to know you. If you do not wish to answer these questions, politely move the conversation on.

When making an appointment for a meeting, make sure you do this at least two weeks in advance.

[Source – DIT, FCDO]

Titles

In Chinese, the family name comes first. For example, Mr. Lee Tsien Sam would be addressed as Mr. Lee.

In Malay, you should address people using the first of their two family names.

You should use the family name when addressing Singaporean Indians as there are a variety of different conventions.

[Source – DIT, FCDO]

Attire

Men should wear dark trousers, a long-sleeved shirt and a tie when participating in business meetings. Women should wear a blouse and a skirt or trousers.

Jackets are usually not required as the weather can be particularly hot and humid.

[Source – DIT, FCDO]

Women in business

Seeing women in senior positions in businesses throughout Singapore is significantly more common than in other Asian countries. Thanks to advances in gender equality, women now hold a variety of positions within companies.

It is expected that women keep a professional distance from their male colleagues, avoiding prolonged eye contact.

In Singapore, men are used to working with foreign women who occupy more senior roles, and therefore will treat them equally.

[Source – DIT, FCDO]

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