

Singapore business culture

Language

Singapore is generally a straightforward place to do business and what would be considered normal business in the UK will almost invariably be acceptable in Singapore. There are four official languages in Singapore – English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil.

English is the language of business and administration, and is widely spoken. Translation and interpreting services are usually available at hotel business centres, but these services are unlikely to be required. Most Singaporeans are bilingual and speak their mother tongue as well as English.

Meetings and Presentations

Visiting (or name) cards are an essential part of business protocol. They should be presented with both hands and with the name facing the recipient. No elaborate bowing is necessary in formal business meetings. A firm handshake will suffice. When addressing Chinese people the family name is given first. For example, Mr Lee Tsien Sam would be addressed as Mr Lee. When addressing Malay people the first of their two family names is used. Singaporean Indians use a variety of conventions so it is advisable to use the family name.

There are no restrictions or differences for female business travellers. Punctuality is important so every effort should be made to arrive on time.

Normal business attire consists of dark trousers, long-sleeved shirts and ties for men, and blouses, skirts or trousers for women. Due to the hot and humid weather, jackets are not usually required. Appointments should be made at least two weeks in advance.

Negotiations

Singapore has a formal business culture with many rules of etiquette, which vary between the Chinese, Malay and Indian members of the population. Singaporeans are cautious and likely to make sure they are doing business with the right person. As a result, it is necessary to establish a good and genuine relation with a Singaporean counterpart to demonstrate your capabilities are good.

Personal relationships and networking are important elements of doing businesses in Singapore. Status and hierarchy are important in Singapore business culture, where companies have a top-down structure. Decisions are nearly always taken by the senior management and subordinates avoid directly questioning or criticizing their superiors.

Small talk is common at the outset of meetings; you may be asked questions about your family or other personal details – this is usually not considered rude, but part of the getting-to-know-you phase. Politely sidestep these if you do not wish to answer.

Source – UKTI

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