

Business etiquette in the UK

Placements in the Faculty of Business and Law

The culture and pace of business in the UK may be different to what you expect if you have not experienced it before. This short guide has been put together to help you avoid difficult situations and to ensure you make a good impression on your colleagues.



Meetings, presentations, and other business occasions

Time is highly valued in UK business, with wasted time being considered a wasted resource. Punctuality is therefore a very important trait, and almost everyone will either arrive on time or a few minutes early for a meeting. If you arrive a couple of minutes late for a meeting, it is usually enough to apologise to the room, but if you are going to be several minutes late for a meeting, it is polite to call the organisers in advance to warn them and apologise.

Most meetings have specific objectives or topics of discussion, often indicated by the distribution of an 'agenda' prior to the meeting itself. It is generally assumed that discussion will stick to the agenda, perhaps after an informal chat at the beginning of the meeting. If there are other issues to discuss, there may be time for "AOB" (any other business). Generally, topics will be brought up, discussed, and then suggestions for action will be made.

Business cards are often exchanged at business occasions, particularly if you are meeting a new client. It is polite to receive these gratefully, perhaps taking a second to glance at the card itself as a mark of respect. Not everyone will have business cards so do not be offended if someone does not offer you theirs.



Humour

Humour is very important in the English language and can often be found in the working environment. British humour can be quite sarcastic or self-deprecating but is generally used to "lighten the mood". You should be careful, though, to only use humour in appropriate settings: the office can be a good home for humour but a formal business meeting requires a more serious approach.



Greetings and introductions

A firm handshake (but not too firm!) is the usual greeting for both men and women in professional situations. Many people will introduce themselves with their first name: this is a good indication that they would prefer you to use their first name when addressing them. If someone introduces themselves as "Mrs Smith" or "Mr Jones" then you should use these forms until asked to use their first name. Generally speaking, it is best to remain formal on first contact in professional situations. Maintaining eye contact as you introduce yourself to someone is well-received, but don't stare too much!



Social aspects of work

The British love drinking tea, although some prefer coffee. You will probably notice in your new job that people regularly offer to make tea/coffee for their team, and it is a good idea for you to offer your help with this. This is a great way to get to know your colleagues, as it opens up the opportunity to small talk. If you are not a keen tea or coffee drinker though, it is ok to say so.

Often you will find that colleagues extend their professional interaction beyond the working hours. It is common for colleagues to go out for a meal at lunch time or for a drink after work, especially on special occasions (such as a team member's birthday). If you get invited to join these occasions, it is courteous to accept the invite, even if you cannot stay for long. The social occasions are also a great opportunity to really become part of the team and to make friends.



Business clothing

Offices in the UK can have different "dress codes" depending on the culture of the office and the nature of the business. Generally speaking, business clothing is conservative, with men wearing suits and women either business suits or conservative dresses. You should always follow this dress code at interviews.

It is always better to dress smarter than necessary, rather than too casual. If you are starting a new job, you can ask about the dress code before you start.



Business gifts

Giving gifts is very rare in business situations in the UK. Indeed, some UK businesses have policies forbidding the accepting of gifts from other businesses on legal grounds. If you wish to give a gift to an individual or business as a "thank you" for something, make sure your gift is small and not overly expensive. Suitable gifts might include flowers, chocolates, or something from your home country.



Personal space

Personal space is very valued by British people. It is considered impolite to put yourself in very close proximity to another person during conversation.



Direct statements

British people often avoid direct statements or commands in favour of "more polite" suggestions and indirect speech. For example, when a senior colleague says "perhaps you could finish that later", they are probably telling you to finish it later. In a meeting, if a colleague says "that's an interesting point, but...", then they are probably not endorsing your idea.

By using indirect speech yourself, you can appear more accommodating, and will avoid appearing rude or arrogant.



Pace of work

You might find that the pace of work in the UK is different to what it is in your home country; it might be more relaxed, or more rigid, depending on where you come from. It also varies between different sectors and different companies, so it is a good idea to pay attention to how your colleagues behave to get an idea of what is appropriate in your work place. In general, in the UK it is acceptable and normal for people to have short conversations with each other throughout the day, but not constantly. This might happen whilst they are sitting at their desks, or if you meet a colleague in the common areas. People often talk about their personal lives to a certain extent, and are likely to ask you some personal questions to get to know you better.