



WORKPLACE CULTURE & ETIQUETTE

A GUIDE FOR STUDENTS

Starting a new job, whether it's a placement, internship or graduate role, can be an uncertain experience. You may find it helpful to think about what is expected of you as an employee, but this might be challenging if there are considerable cultural differences between the UK and your home country, or if you find it difficult to 'read' non-verbal communication, or if you have never worked before.

This guide will help draw your attention to some of the common expectations, behaviours and work practices of a UK workplace. To supplement this information, you could try to contact recent graduates at the organisation you are joining, or have discussions with any staff you meet at campus events or during the selection process, to learn more about the culture of the organisation.

In this guide:

- Greetings
- Communicating with colleagues
- Non-verbal behaviour
- Dress code
- Time-keeping
- Meetings
- Asking for help and offering opinions
- Office rules and working hours
- Equality
- Further information/reading

Greetings

Shaking hands is the formal way to greet someone in the UK. It is common to shake hands when you meet someone new, or are meeting someone that you don't see regularly (i.e. immediate colleagues don't generally shake hands on a daily basis). It is also polite to smile and make eye contact with the person you are greeting.

It is common for most people in the workplace to be on first name terms, but until you are invited to use the given name of someone very senior, it might be best to use their title and family name e.g. Mr Smith.

Business cards are sometimes exchanged when greeting someone new; the process is informal and a casual glance at the information on the card provides a sufficient acknowledgement.

Communicating with colleagues

If we imagine the communication styles of different cultures on a sliding scale, ranging from very direct to very indirect, the British style of communication would tend towards the indirect half of the scale. Although some British people are more direct than others, there is a tendency for British people to communicate in a polite and understated way. People often use words such as 'perhaps' or 'possibly' to qualify what they are saying and will try to let others down gently if they have

something negative to say. This indirect style of communication may mean that things are often implied rather than explicitly defined; if you ask a direct question you might receive a response that is quite ambiguous.

The British sense of humour which is often dry, sarcastic and self-deprecating is generally a common part of day-to-day communication and is often used to establish a relaxed or positive atmosphere. Non-verbal cues will help you to decide whether to take something literally or not. Tone of voice, facial expressions and body language all add context to what someone says. For example, if someone uses words that tell you they are saying something negative, but they say it with a smile on their face, this might imply they are being sarcastic.

You may find that the style of communication is more direct in particular situations/contexts, e.g. if you have asked for feedback you can usually expect it to be direct and honest. Different work environments can also influence communication style: if you work in a competitive, fast-paced or stressful environment you can expect colleagues to be more direct and show less restraint in their communication with one another. In a multicultural workplace, you can expect to experience a broad range of communication styles.

Many offices are open plan, and you will notice that people tend not to speak very loudly and avoid disrupting others. When making conversation with colleagues, particularly those you have recently met, it is considered impolite to ask people for personal information e.g. whether they are married, religious etc. It is also unusual to discuss your salary.

You might experience or observe colleagues gently making fun of one another, just like siblings. E-mail is a commonplace form of workplace communication and the style of writing is quite formal. Shortened 'text style' language should be avoided. For a guide on how to write professional e-mails look at www.worketiquette.co.uk/WrittenCommunicationCategory.

Non-verbal behaviour

Your non-verbal behaviour can send strong messages about your mood, opinion, intentions and feelings. It is said that 55% of communication is based on what people see rather than what they hear. Therefore your body language could have a significant impact on how others perceive you. Eye contact is considered to be polite in the UK. If you make frequent eye contact when you are speaking with colleagues (even senior staff) you are demonstrating that you are interested in what they have to say. Avoiding eye contact could imply shyness, disinterest, boredom, lack of confidence or indifference. Although eye contact is important, staring should be avoided as this is likely to make others feel uncomfortable. It could also be seen as confrontational.

Your body language, i.e. your posture, facial expressions, gestures, how you stand and sit etc, also sends out messages. Generally, it is a good idea to sit/stand up straight, avoid fidgeting and direct your attention to whoever you are speaking with. Here are some examples of different body language and what it might say:

- Folding your arms could demonstrate that you are bored, defensive, unapproachable or even sceptical about what others are saying
- A frown could indicate that you are deep in thought, or that you are anxious, angry or disagree with what is being said
- Occasionally nodding your head when someone else is talking demonstrates that you are listening carefully/are in agreement
- It is quite common for people in the UK to use hand movements/gestures to punctuate what they say. Using hand movements (in moderation) to emphasise what you are saying can show enthusiasm/passion. However, pointing at other people would be considered impolite and confrontational
- Speaking to someone with your hands in your pockets could appear disrespectful, especially if you are talking to someone senior

- Tapping your foot can indicate impatience or anxiety
- Leaning slightly forward can show that you are interested in what is being said and want to hear more.

In the UK, physical contact between colleagues is usually limited to a handshake and you will find that personal space is important to most people. Many people prefer not to stand/sit very close to others. You may find that if someone feels that you are standing/sitting too close to them, they will move away to a comfortable distance. Likewise, if they feel you are too far away, they may move towards you.

Dress code

Expectations of appearance and clothing vary between different industries and organisations. If you are unsure about the dress code, either ask someone before you start work or dress smartly at first and adapt to how others dress in the workplace. Even if the workplace has a fairly relaxed dress code, you should always dress smartly to attend an interview. Generally, most office-based roles require a smart dress code, but may incorporate a 'dress down' Friday where staff can wear clothes that are a little more casual than usual.

Time-keeping

Time-keeping is very important in the UK and you should arrive on time for work and for meetings. If you are going to be late for any reason you should let someone know at the earliest opportunity.

Meetings

Meetings usually have a specific purpose and the organiser often circulates an agenda to notify attendees of the time, location and items to be discussed. If you are expected to do any preparation, the agenda will usually make this clear.

Meetings begin promptly (so punctuality is important). Notes, sometimes called 'minutes', are sometimes taken to record the main discussion points and any action points agreed. These are circulated to those who were in attendance.

If you are invited to a meeting that you cannot attend, or will be significantly late for, it is expected that you will offer your apologies i.e. inform the organiser that you cannot attend.

It is usually clear from the agenda whether the meeting will take the form of a briefing, where a (perhaps more senior) member of staff will deliver information, or a discussion where all attendees are likely to be asked to contribute. If you attend a meeting where you are actively contributing to discussions, it is considered impolite to talk over others or interrupt. In any meeting, you can show that you are listening to what others have to say by focussing your attention in the direction of the speaker and making some eye contact. It is important that your body language in meetings is open and attentive, for example, by sitting up straight and occasionally leaning forward and/or nodding.

Asking for help and offering opinions

Most graduate employers provide lots of opportunities for you to gather advice and assistance from more senior staff, possibly by providing a mentor. However, beyond any planned meetings, you should not be afraid to ask for help or advice if you need it. Likewise, it is common for UK-based employers to value input/ideas from members of staff at any level. If you notice a problem, potential for savings or improvements, it is acceptable to discuss it with your manager.

Office rules and working hours

Different organisations, even departments, might have different policies relating to things like use of mobile phones, accessing personal e-mails accounts and even whether you can eat at your desk. Important rules and policies should be explained during your induction to a new job. Ask questions if you are unsure.

The standard working day in the UK is 9am until around 5pm but different organisations and sectors might have different norms. Depending on the sector you work in, you might be expected to work beyond your regular hours frequently or occasionally in order to achieve specific deadlines. The culture of the workplace can also have an impact on the hours that employees work. In some workplaces, there may be a culture of working long hours that employees adopt to fit in.

Equality

Men and women are treated equally in most work places. There are laws that state a person cannot be discriminated against on the basis of age, gender, marital status, pregnancy and maternity leave, nationality, ethnic background, race, colour, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, disability, religion/belief or nationality. Targetjobs.co.uk provides further information and advice on equal opportunities; targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/equality-and-diversity

Further information/reading

Everything you need to know at work – a complete manual of workplace skills by Ciara Woods - includes information on meeting and greeting, office technology, meetings, managing your working relationships with colleagues and clients as well as tips on skills such as presenting and managing projects. There is also a section on spelling rules and commonly confused words. A reference copy of this book is available from the Careers Service in the Virgil Building.

The following links provide further information to help you establish some social and business norms for the UK:

- www.bath.ac.uk/guides/living-in-the-uk - includes information on daily life and culture in the UK.
- www.worketiquette.co.uk/WrittenCommunicationCategory - details about writing business letters and business e-mails
- www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/global-etiquette/UK - includes details on appropriate business etiquette e.g. greetings, expectations at business meetings and communication styles
- www.worketiquette.co.uk/WorkEtiquetteBasicsCategory - includes information on dress code, body language and some general dos and don'ts e.g. using mobile phones in the workplace

Careers Service

July 2017

© University of Bath

This publication is available online at www.bath.ac.uk/students/careers/information-resources/helpsheets.

If you need this information in another format, please contact us.