



## it's not just language: *understanding cultural differences can make cross-border communication easier*

The use of different languages is often the most noticeable distinction between any two cultures across the world. However, other key differences exist that impact communication in the workplace.

Imagine you're a U.S. businessperson on an extended business trip in London. You're in a meeting with your British colleagues and you suggest that the group "table" discussion on the matter at hand. To your surprise, your British colleagues take this as a signal to discuss things further.

This illustrates a key cultural difference around the use of a phrase—to Americans, "tabling" something means postponing indefinitely, while to Brits it means the exact opposite. Despite speaking the same language, the American and British colleagues had a misunderstanding.

Companies that send employees on assignment to different countries should be aware of these kinds of cultural differences so they can help their assignees prepare for the trip or move—and thrive once they're there. Here are some of the most critical differences to consider.

### be independent—or join the group?

Many countries distinguish themselves from one another based on individualistic versus collective behavior.

To better understand this dimension, [social psychologist Geert Hofstede](#) conducted a large survey of people in more than 40 countries between 1967 and 1973. From the results, he established the individualism vs. collectivism (IDV) index,

as well as five other indices that help quantify culture.

The U.S. scores highest for individuality, followed closely by Australia and the United Kingdom. In these locations, identity is very closely tied to the individual, and autonomy and "taking care of yourself" are valued.

At the other end of the scale, China, Hong Kong and many Latin countries score high in collectivism. People in these countries often seek group harmony and attempt to reach a consensus in many situations.

It's important to understand these differences when doing business in different cultures. Those in more individualistic societies may be comfortable taking on tasks with little direction, and they likely won't hesitate to offer opinions, which can be mistaken for being rash or arrogant by someone not familiar with the culture.

Meanwhile, those in more collective societies may want more input from the group and seek out agreement from all involved—not to be confused with being slow or indecisive.

### the status of the status quo

Hofstede also established the power distance index (PDI), which looks at how accepting locals are of hierarchy. Countries such as Mexico, China and India score highly, meaning people generally understand and accept social roles, and are less inclined to question authority.

Nordic countries, the U.K. and Germany all score fairly low. People in these locations generally seek to distribute power

more equally, and give less weight to roles and titles. As such, questioning authority is much less taboo.

Understanding the PDI can be a great asset for multi-national business meetings. For instance, a British national doing business in India should be aware that hierarchy and status will likely play a bigger role than they're used to. Respecting that difference—and understanding how to communicate effectively in such a system—would go a long way toward establishing rapport with locals and achieving business goals.

### should we risk it?

Team dynamics can be strongly influenced by whether individuals are more inclined to take risks or are more restrained in their approach. Hofstede looked at this dimension in the uncertainty avoidance index (UAI).

People from countries that score high on the UAI scale, like Japan and France, are more likely to favor safe, measured approaches. On the other end of the scale, people in places such as Hong Kong and the U.S. are more likely to roll the dice even if there are risks involved.

A good way for people on different parts of this spectrum to work together is to focus on meeting somewhere in the middle. Those who are generally more restrained can open up to a bit more risk, while the risk takers of the world can try a slightly safer approach.

### the other type of language

Non-verbal communication carries a lot of weight. The way body language and gestures are perceived can vary greatly in different countries.

For instance, maintaining eye contact while speaking with someone is seen as a sign of respect in many Western countries, but it's considered a slight or challenge in many Asian and African nations, according to Dr. Kris Rugsaken in "[Body Speaks: Body Language Around the World.](#)"

These types of differences don't end with the eyes. The American "goodbye" wave means "no" in many parts of Europe and Latin America. Tapping your nose in the U.K. indicates something is confidential, while it means "watch out" to Italians.

While there are many other examples involving different gestures and habits, the message here is clear: It's a good idea to research the non-verbal norms of a country before moving there for work—it'll make communication a lot easier, and it'll ensure you don't accidentally confuse or offend any locals.



Related to this is the idea of personal space. Research has shown that what constitutes an acceptable amount of personal space varies across cultures. So while you may think you're safely outside of someone's bubble, they may feel that you're uncomfortably close. Or you may be perceived as untrustworthy or "standoffish" if you're not close enough. Again, it's a good idea to understand local norms and traditions up front.

### so...what to do with all this?

Perhaps the best piece of advice to an employee relocating to a different country is to learn about and open up to the new culture. This often requires the employee to:

- reserve judgment
- question his or her assumptions
- adjust his or her mindset
- embrace diversity

Companies like yours can help these employees by providing cultural training as part of their relocation benefits. Cultural training will help expats adapt to the new country in which they live or do business by identifying potential cultural differences like those mentioned in this article. It will also help them develop the mindset and skills needed to successfully conduct cross-border business.

Of course, cultural differences often *do* involve spoken language (even if we didn't talk about that here). Providing language training on top of cultural training can help set up your expats—and your business—for success anywhere in the world.

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Want more on setting up international assignments for success? Check out our report on [best practices for ensuring employee safety abroad.](#)

