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## Working with the Spanish

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Spain's powerful world empire of the 16th and 17th centuries ultimately yielded command of the seas to England. Subsequent failure to embrace the mercantile and industrial revolutions caused the country to fall behind Britain, France, and Germany in economic and political power. Spain remained neutral in World Wars I and II but suffered through a devastating civil war (1936-39). A peaceful transition to democracy following the death of dictator Francisco Franco in 1975, and rapid economic modernization (Spain joined the EU in 1986) gave Spain a dynamic and rapidly growing economy and made it a global champion of freedom and human rights. The government continues to battle the Basque Fatherland and Liberty (ETA) organization, but its major focus for the immediate future will be on measures to reverse the severe economic recession that started in mid-2008.

### Spanish Cultural Values

In both business and social circles, individualism is highly valued. Spanish culture highlights the importance of self and one's family. The individual shoulders responsibility for his/her own decisions but the best interests of the family / group are kept in mind.

This individualism also translates into a strong sense of personal pride. Spaniards, like many cultures, are concerned that they look good in the eyes of others and try to avoid looking foolish. This means that they can be sensitive. Special care must be taken not to offend them, by implying that they are not adequately prepared or imposing decisions with orders. They will, however, freely give advice to others and offence should not be taken at this. They also consider information a valuable commodity and may be loath to share it.

The family remains the basis of the social structure and includes both the immediate and extended family. It is less common now for family members to work together in a family business.

Many Spaniards feel that personal qualities and relationships are extremely significant. Style and image are considered signs of social status and respectability.

In Spain, managers prefer to have precise answers to questions and give precise instructions in order to reduce conflict. This also reflects their more cautious approach towards new ideas.

The Spanish prefer to do business with those they know and trust. It is important that you spend sufficient time letting your business colleagues get to know you. Once you have developed a relationship, it will prevail even if you move departments or companies, since your Spanish colleague's allegiance will be to you rather than the company you represent.

Trust and personal relationships are the cornerstone of business.

### Customary Business Practices

Working hours can vary but generally speaking, offices open at 09.00 and close mid-evening with a long break around 1.30-2.00pm. However, in the northern cities, Spanish working hours have become more "Europeanised". It's best to arrange business meetings for mid-morning due to this long lunch-break.

Business appointments should be made well in advance and confirmed by email beforehand. Punctuality is expected of foreign visitors; however, you may find your Spanish colleagues arrive up to 30 minutes late.

Hierarchy and rank are very important. You should deal with people of similar rank to your own. Decision-making is held at the top of the company. You may never meet the person who ultimately makes the decision.

Spaniards are less interested in high-tech presentations than in personal relationships. Before beginning a first business meeting, there is a great deal of small talk. People like to get to know you as a person before they will conduct business with you. You may be asked questions about your background, education and interests. Serious discussions can begin after this is completed.

In Spain, the purpose of meetings has traditionally been regarded as communicating instructions rather than taking decisions, as Spaniards like to be independent and make decisions on their own. This is beginning to change but participants still take a personal interest in putting their own ideas forward and getting them accepted, rather than amending them to meet the general consensus. Agendas are often used but not always followed rigidly. In Spain, it is not considered rude to interrupt someone while conversing. Therefore, expect to be interrupted frequently during conversation. Eye contact is very important.

Participants at a meeting in Spain will, however, respect the view of the most senior person present, whose proposal is most likely to be accepted by all, and this is the easiest way to achieve consensus. It is important to obtain unanimity rather than a majority decision, in order to avoid criticism later.

In Spain, it is acceptable to discuss politics; however, it is best to refrain from making political comparisons between Spain and your country. Other good conversation topics include sports, particularly football. It is also appreciated if you express an interest in Spain's history and culture.

Avoid discussing religion or asking too many personal questions about a person's family, job and interests until you are well acquainted. Also, never make negative comments about bullfighting as it is considered an art and should not be judged on anything but Spanish terms.

Remain patient in all your dealings with the Spanish. They are noted for their friendly and relaxed approach to business and sometimes Spanish bureaucracy can be frustrating. However, be wary of the "mañana" stereotype as in the northern regions, deadlines and punctuality are more closely adhered to.

### **Business Etiquette**

When first introduced or when departing, both men and women shake hands. In Spanish, the last name consists of the surname followed by the mother's maiden name. When addressing people in conversation, it is polite to use only their surname, (For example, when greeting Mr Garcia-Lopez, you would call him Mr Garcia).

Among Spaniards, there is great respect for the elderly and for seniority. Even though someone older or of higher rank may address you by your first name, this informality is not an invitation for you to do likewise. You should still address that person as "Mr" or "Mrs" (*Señor or Señora*) and their last name. "Don" and "Doña" are used, followed by the first name, to show special respect and to flatter the person you are greeting.

Business lunches and dinners are vital part of doing business in Spain and a means of establishing trust and future business relationships. Business is not always discussed over meals as it is generally considered a social activity.

Dress elegantly, even for casual occasions. If invited to a Spaniard's home, you can take chocolates, pastries, or cakes, wine or flowers to the hostess.