



Working with the Swiss

Sweden's wealth was born out of its forests and iron ore. Timber pulp and paper still represent a major export sector. Swedish industry is concentrated in a small number of high quality engineering companies producing mainly capital goods and vehicles.

The Church of Sweden professes the Lutheran branch of Christianity and it has a membership of almost 7 million. Although over 75% of Swedes are members of the church, only 2% attend church services regularly.

The country is known for its high standard of living. As in other Scandinavian countries, the family is extremely important and as such, the rights of children are well protected. The number of women with paid jobs equals that of men, and women are not found in low-paid, part-time jobs but spread throughout the workforce. Most pre-school childcare is publicly funded and there is generous maternity and paternity leave.

The tax burden is one of the highest in the world. The public sector absorbs a third of the work force, most of which is engaged in administering the welfare system.

The primary value of Swedish culture is egalitarianism and there is a relatively small differential between the highest and lowest paid. This value also manifests itself in the workplace in terms of style of dress and demeanour of managers. Swedes are humble and find boasting unacceptable.

Consensus and compromise are sought in both business and social life. This can be seen in the legal system, which has an extensive system of arbitration and tribunals, the openness of government and an industrial policy which favours merger and co-operation.

The role of a manager is as 'coach', as in Britain, rather than the American sense of planner, co-ordinator and trainer. Most managers will rarely give direct orders and do not feel under pressure to show an assertive management style. Decisiveness for its own sake is not especially prized and the word 'compromise' does not have any negative overtones. This can make decision-making slow but as more people take part in the negotiations, implementation is effective.

Additionally, there is great concern that things are done properly and that people matter. It is held that the quality of working life should be as attractive as non-working life. In Sweden, non-working life - particularly skiing and country pursuits - is very highly regarded.

There is a deeply systematic approach to organisational life. Structures and procedures are designed to minimise the need for uncertainty and improvisation. This is most obvious in a concern for punctuality and time-keeping. If a meeting is scheduled to end at a certain time it will end, even if it is incomplete.

Business Practices

Swedes are known for their open but direct style of communication. Swedes tend to be literal and to the point in their communication, often voicing what might be perceived as strong and confrontational opinions. Directness is highly valued in business discussions, but direct criticism should be diplomatic and directed towards aspects of the problem and not towards anyone in particular.

The national character of Swedes is often described as shy, quiet and reserved. As a result, Swedes are often mistaken for being cold or unfriendly but once you get to know them they are extremely warm and hospitable. The fact that they prefer to keep a large degree of separation between their personal and public life often makes them seem uninterested and distant when, in fact, they simply value modest and reserved behaviour.

Agendas are clearly set for meetings with a stated purpose. Swedes are factual, practical, precise, reserved and get to the point quickly. When communicating with Swedes, be clear and concise in detailing what you expect from them. They will be equally clear with you. Presentations are important. They should be clear, to the point and detailed. Reports, briefings and presentations should be backed up by facts, figures, tables and charts. Silence is accepted with ease by Swedes and you shouldn't rush to fill in pauses in the conversation.

There is much pride in local regions and visitors should not praise one area over another. Scandinavians appreciate knowledge of differences between the people of Finland, Norway, Sweden and Denmark.

The Swedes have an intense appreciation of nature and relaxation carries great importance, including taking breaks in the work schedule. Don't rush a Swede who is taking a long coffee break or an even longer lunch break, even if you are inconvenienced by it.

Negotiating

Many business people are fluent in English, especially in the large cities, such as Stockholm, Göteborg and Malmö.

Avoid criticism of Swedish culture, politics or the Swedish sense of humour.

Swedes avoid arguing over sensitive issues in general, especially with foreigners, although if such a discussion begins, one should not be offended if a Swede cuts it off abruptly.

Do not be too open in expressing emotion and similarly appearing reserved or even slightly shy can give a positive impression to the Swedish hosts.

Swedes take punctuality for business meetings very seriously and expect you to do likewise. Call with an explanation if you are delayed.

Swedes are generally tough negotiators. They are methodical and detailed, slow to change their positions and will push hard for concessions.

In the relatively small private sector, it is important to know who is who and how everyone fits in the corporate structure. Important decisions are often made by middle and lower level managers.

While decision making may be a slow process, implementing decisions is often rapid. Do not call a Swedish businessperson at home unless it is important and you have a well-established relationship with this person.

Business Entertaining

Business lunches and dinners are quite popular. Make reservations in advance. Formal restaurants are recommended for business meals.

Invite spouses to business dinners, but not to lunches. If you are invited to a Swedish home, you should bring flowers for the hostess. The *smörgåsbord* is a buffet (hot and cold) served all year round, and especially during Christmas and Easter.

The toast is more formal in Sweden than elsewhere in Northern Europe. Allow your host and those older than you to toast before proposing a toast to them. "*Skål*" is the Swedish for "cheers". Wait until your host has said *Skål* before touching your drink. If you are seated next to the hostess as the guest of honour, you may be expected to make a speech.

Greetings

The flat structure and low levels of hierarchy in Swedish companies create a relatively informal business culture. People greet each other with a handshake and use first names in almost every situation. When you meet someone after you have been a guest at his or her home, thank him or her immediately. Usually a third person will introduce you to a group, but if this doesn't happen, go around the room, shaking hands and telling your name to each person.