
Czech Republic



Continuing with our review of the Emerging Europe countries, this month we focus on the Czech Republic, which emerged from over 40 years of Communist rule and was the first former Eastern Bloc state to acquire the status of a developed economy.

The Czech Republic was formed on the 1st of January 1993, when Czechoslovakia peacefully dissolved into its constituent states, the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. The country is bordered by Poland to the north, Germany to the west, Austria to the south and Slovakia to the east.

The population of the Czech Republic is 10.6 million people with 1.3 million inhabitants in the beautiful capital of Prague. Family is a key element of Czech culture and is generally placed ahead of work. Traditional family roles are still fairly strong in Czech society.

Many of the people in management positions in the Czech Republic are multilingual. Most speak English, Russian and/or German. On average, people above the age of 50 can speak a little bit of German, Russian and English whereas the younger generation mainly speak English, although French and German are also popular.

In business, older employees were influenced by the Soviet-style systems they were brought up to see as the norm. The younger generations, however, are more likely to be influenced by western business models and thinking.

At first contact Czechs may often seem cautious and impersonal but with a considerate approach they will become more engaged. Czechs almost never go straight to the point and meetings start with some small talk. You have to consider the language barrier and moderate your English if you don't speak any Czech. However, even a few words of Czech will make a good impression.

Traditionally, Czech management styles have been somewhat paternalistic and hierarchical with managers issuing direct commands which employees were expected to follow. This style accounts for the lack of initiative which many expatriates encounter when working with Czech colleagues. With time, perseverance and proving to be a trustworthy colleague, self-motivation and initiative can be encouraged. Trying to do too much, too quickly could prove counterproductive.

As with their German and Polish neighbours, Czechs are generally detail oriented and prefer to have all the facts and figures at meetings. It is important that you arrive at the meeting fully prepared and on time otherwise this can imply a lack of professionalism. They tend not to show too much emotion within a meeting and this, coupled with a reserved manner and indirect language can make your colleagues difficult to read. Do not mistake this lack of feedback as a sign of lack of interest. They also share with their German neighbours a desire for "uncertainty avoidance". Thorough debate and analysis, with fall-back positions, will be discussed before being cautiously implemented.

A sense of dark humour and an ability not to take things too seriously are two important qualities for most Czechs. Furthermore, modesty in attitude is also a very important virtue so as to not appear better than someone else. Like the British, the Czechs are quite self-deprecating. For example, a response to a compliment is not to say thank you but offer a statement of disagreement. Czechs quite often underestimate themselves since they rarely boast.

Finally, hospitality and socialising are an important element in building effective relationships so invitations should not be turned down. Business matters can be discussed and decided whilst dining out. But be careful - the Czech Republic has the highest beer consumption per capita in the world!