



Egypt

This month, we are reviewing Egypt, the most populous country in the Arab world and the third most populous country in Africa, behind Nigeria and Ethiopia. Most of the country is desert, so about 95% of the population is concentrated in a narrow strip of fertile land along the Nile River. Egypt's rapid population growth has placed stress on already limited natural resources, jobs, housing, education and health care. According to The World Bank, however, as reform momentum is sustained, economic activity is expected to improve and imbalances are projected to narrow further.

Egypt is culturally influenced by the values, traditions and practices of Europe and the Ottoman Empire. It also has a long and glorious pre-Islamic history that is a source of Egyptian pride. Having been seen as a land of opportunity by surrounding countries in the first half of the twentieth century, many Lebanese, Greek, Italian and Armenian people moved to Egypt. They also enriched the Egyptian culture with their traditions, art and knowledge.

Religion plays a large role in Egyptian society. Islamic principles regarding law, politics and social customs continue to influence Egypt's laws and political interactions despite Egypt's formal status as a secular state.

Although Modern Standard Arabic is the official language, Egyptian Arabic is the most widely spoken among the languages spoken in Egypt. Most educated Egyptians are quite fluent in English and/or French.

Family is one of the most important aspects of Egyptian life. It is not uncommon for Egyptian people to greet each other by asking after the other's mother or father. Someone may be late to your appointment due to last minute family issues. (Don't be surprised if you are asked personal questions about your own family as this is part of their getting-to-know-you process).

Egypt is a hierarchical society. In the workplace, centralisation is often popular, subordinates expect to be told what to do and the ideal boss is a benevolent autocrat. The 'We' is important – people belong to in-groups (families, teams or organisations) who look after each other in exchange for loyalty. Relationships have priority over task.

Leading by consensus or managing issues collaboratively is not common, although this is changing slowly. Once trust is established, Egyptians are loyal, proud of their work and creative. They also enjoy formal recognition as it gives them status before their colleagues and families. Losing face is a hard thing for anyone, even more so in a country where status is important. Discuss challenging issue with someone privately and respectfully.

Punctuality is generally less important than it is in the West. If your colleagues are delayed, their previous meeting may have taken longer than anticipated (it is much better to allow a good meeting to run beyond its time than impose an end to it, to be on time for the next meeting). Traffic challenges are also legendary in the major cities. Patience is paramount and you can expect to be offered tea or another beverage whilst waiting – accept this gesture of hospitality. In the case of an important project, find time to (ideally) speak with your team members to stress the importance of respecting deadlines.

During meetings, Egyptian colleagues may take phone calls and have side conversations with others coming in and out of the office. They are skilled at multi-tasking and are not being rude. There will be little debate amongst colleagues or brainstorming with you present, although this is changing amongst younger Egyptians.

Communication style is generally polite and rather indirect. Open disagreement and confrontation is avoided, so you usually do not hear a direct 'no'. Egyptians often hint at difficulties through humour so listen for any hidden messages. Summarise agreements and confirm again on details, timescales and deadlines, as well as your partner's ability to deliver the agreement.

Business cards are a must to demonstrate your identity and status. Keep in mind that they represent you and your company personally so handle them with care. Offer business cards with your right hand only, with the appropriate language facing outward to the recipient.

Handshakes are often prolonged. A common phrase that accompanies a greeting is 'salaam aleikum' ('may peace be with you'), which should be replied to with 'waaleikum us salam' ('may peace be with you also'). However, the exact phrase varies by town/city and dialect. Be aware that some Egyptians – both men and women – will not shake hands with the opposite sex. This is a religious practice and should never be taken personally.