



Italy

This month our focus returns to Italy, a country famous for its outstanding art works, fashion, cars, operas, architecture and food.

Italy, officially known as the Italian Republic, is a peninsula located in southern Europe which extends into the Mediterranean Sea. It is surrounded by France, Switzerland, Austria and Slovenia. Also, it has two enclaves within its borders San Marino and The Holy See (Vatican City). Italy has a population of over 62 million people.

The country is divided into a highly-industrialized and developed northern part, where approximately 75% of the nation's wealth is produced; and a less-developed, more agriculture-dependent southern part. As a result, unemployment in the north is lower and per capita income is higher compared to the south.

Italy is a country so diverse that most Italians claim allegiance to their specific region, city or even town before that of Italy itself. This is rooted in its history - until the late 1800s, Italy was made up of several autonomous countries. Each area in Italy boasts its own identity, whether in food, wine, fashion, tradition or landscape. Italians are usually happy to be engaged in small talk about complimenting their region.

One of the main characteristics of Italian culture is strong family bonds (la famiglia) with Mamma at the centre, even though in big cities there might have been a recent change in this respect. Italian culture also places much importance on an individual's reputation or honour. It is perceived to reflect their family and upbringing and is essentially a way of opening up opportunities. In Italy, a person's honour is defined by the impression they leave on others – their 'la bella figura' (which literally means 'good image'). This includes your ability to be assertive without being arrogant, how well you present yourself and your manners.

Italy is a largely an Individualist culture, ("me" centred), especially in the big and rich cities of the North. For Italians having their own personal ideas and objectives in life is very motivating and the route to happiness is through personal fulfilment. This does vary in Southern Italy where less Individualist behaviour can be observed - the family network and socialising with the group one belongs to are important.

When introducing yourself, you are expected to use your full name. If your counterpart has not been introduced by their title, you should call them by their surname, with a generic Signore or Signora (Mr, Ms). When you are introduced to a group of people, remember shake hands with everyone individually when you meet and when you leave.

Meetings start with small talk, which can be extensive. It is important to be patient and let them set the pace. Initial meetings can be quite formal, but this usually gets more relaxed as the relationship develops. Meetings in Italy may appear somewhat chaotic, with frequent interruptions and several parallel conversations. Do not take this personally; it also does not indicate a lack of interest.

The Italian workplace is based upon the expectation of special privileges. People can change the rules or make exceptions when they feel that it satisfies their personal needs or strengthens important relationships.

Managing in Italy may require a completely different approach in terms of dealing with your Italian team. For example, hierarchy is important in Italian business culture. Whilst everyone is usually given the opportunity to speak during meetings, the credit for decisions is almost always given to the person with the highest status. It is also much more important to build a personal relationship with every employee so that you keep them happy and motivated. You have to make sure that they feel that they are appreciated at work. Maintain this network of relationships and strong ties of personal loyalty and respect. Power and influence is more likely to be defined by who you know and who is 'keeping you in the loop.'

Italians can be very competitive, so it is not uncommon that colleagues are often competing with each other. Competition among employees is perceived as a good thing in Italy and stimulates productivity.

Finally, it is easy to perceive Italian organisations as unruly as the focus on their planning is not always instantly identifiable. However, recognise that their method – though perhaps unclear to you – does indeed work; Italians generally perform very well in what they do.