



Switzerland

This month, our attention turns to Switzerland, a landlocked, mountainous country, whose geographical position in central Europe and studied neutrality has given it the access and political stability to become one of the world's wealthiest countries. The people are given a direct say in their own affairs under Switzerland's system of direct democracy, which has no parallel in any other country.

The population of 8 million people is divided into German (65%), French (18%), Italian (10%) and Romansch (1%) speaking communities throughout the country's 26 cantons. The cantons in Switzerland are very autonomous and have their own authorities and different approaches to education, tax etc. The average Swiss has a strong feeling of belonging towards their home canton, especially in the German-speaking part; rather than calling themselves just Swiss, they are Zürcher, Basler, or Berner (a person from Zurich, Basel, or Bern).

Switzerland has for centuries been a neutral state. It has compulsory military service for male citizens, though this and indeed the role of the army altogether have recently been called into question. Nevertheless, joining up and passing through the "recruit school" has been a rite of passage for generations of young Swiss men.

As well as banking, Switzerland attracts highly skilled experts in its technology, pharmacology and biotechnology industries. The country has low tax rates, a stable economy, low crime rates, excellent infrastructure and a high standard of living. But against this, Switzerland is one of the most expensive countries in the world to live.

The stereotype of Switzerland – of watches, chocolate, punctuality and precision is different from the reality and it may take a long time to fully understand this complex country. Expats comment it takes a long time to become fully accepted by the Swiss. They are private people preferring to keep work and personal life separate. Ostentatious behaviour, boasting and a vulgar lifestyle are socially unacceptable. If you are willing to put in the time and effort, the rapport you establish with them will prove very worthwhile.

In the workplace, the Swiss are pragmatic, hard-working and focused on efficiency and quality. Make a good first impression by being straight-forward, serious, thoroughly prepared and conservatively dressed. Always arrive for meetings on time and demonstrate respect by using Mr, Dr, etc. until invited to use first names. Do not ask too many personal questions either.

People tend to be quite formal in meetings and task-oriented. Avoid opening a meeting by making a joke. Communication is fairly direct and frank and body language is limited. Discussions will be open, with everybody contributing, with an aim of arriving at a consensus and leaving the meeting with a clear action plan.

Generally, the Swiss are conservative in their opinions and will not change their minds easily. They will need plenty of facts and a persuasive argument before agreeing to a new plan or procedure. Companies are often very hierarchical, even though they may initially not seem that way, and people expect to work within clearly established lines of authority. Once announced, decisions are not discussed or questioned. On the other hand, decisions are rarely made without the consensus of the whole group they affect. The Swiss, especially those in the German Swiss part, accomplish collaboration and teamwork within clear and respected hierarchies under the guidance of an accepted leader. This consensus-driven style and the methodical decision process is conducted with diligence and precision and takes time and patience. French and Italian

Swiss follow a similar but less rigid approach. Influencing the decision making requires winning the support of as many of the stakeholders as you possibly can.

Finally, when negotiating, the Swiss do not like haggling or much emotion preferring a straight-forward, honest approach. They may use pressure techniques including opening with their best offer or showing inflexibility. The use of silence is normal and not necessarily a negotiation technique. Be very careful if you intend to use aggressive, pressure tactics as these rarely strengthen one's position. Extreme positions are viewed as inappropriate and will upset your Swiss counterpart.