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## The Netherlands

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This month, our attention turns to The Netherlands situated in north-western Europe. It has the 17th largest economy in the world and the sixth largest in the European Union (EU). According to the World Economic Forum it's the fourth most competitive economy in the world.

The Netherlands borders Germany to the east, Belgium to the south, and the North Sea to the west and north. The name "Netherlands" means "Low Lands" in reference to the nation's topography as an alluvial plain.

The Netherlands is divided into twelve provinces. Amsterdam is the capital, but the government meets in The Hague. Utrecht is the transportation hub, while the port city of Rotterdam is the economic heartland. These four cities together with a string of interconnected towns form the Randstad ("rim city") which has a population of 7 million.

Dutch company structures have traditionally been flat in hierarchy and people will cut across reporting lines if necessary. The egalitarianism and openness evident in society is also seen in the workplace. For employees the most important thing is being independent, hierarchy for convenience only, equal rights, accessible managers, a leader who is a 'coach' and empowerment. Employees expect to be consulted. Control is disliked and attitudes towards managers are informal and on first name basis.

To be an effective manager in The Netherlands is to be supportive of your people. Decision-making is by consensus. The team values equality, solidarity and quality in their working lives. Conflicts are resolved by compromise and negotiation and the Dutch are known for their long discussions until consensus has been reached.

The Dutch are also known for being direct in conversation. They do understand that their openness and straightforwardness can be difficult to other cultures where understatement and politeness are the 'norm'. At a first meeting, however, such directness would not extend to purely personal issues such as their religion or problems in the home.

Punctuality is essential and deadlines must be adhered to. Lateness, absenteeism and postponements are signs of untrustworthiness and will put a strain on relationships.

Unlike other cultures that use pre-meeting lobbying, the Dutch do not like this approach as they see it as devious and underhand. Meetings can be time-consuming as there is a need to include the opinions from different levels of the organisation. Implementation of a project is often swift though as real buy-in by everyone concerned has been achieved.

Finally, although humour is often used in business situations, it is not all the time and business discussions are often very serious with irony or sarcasm being interpreted as lack of commitment.