

Belgium



This month, our attention turns to Belgium, one of the smaller countries in Western Europe that borders the North Sea with neighbouring countries including France, Germany, Luxembourg, and Netherlands. The capital, Brussels, is the headquarters of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato), making it the home of thousands of international diplomats and civil servants. Antwerp has developed into one of the largest ports in the world, servicing massive volumes of inward and outward trade for the EU.

Belgium plays an important role in global matters disproportionate to its size and economic power. However, there is no one cohesive "Belgian" culture. There are significant differences in approaches and attitude between the two ethnic groupings of the Walloons and the Flemish.

The Dutch-speaking Flemish community, mostly found in the northern region of Flanders, comprises about 60% (6.5 million) of the population. Their language is Flemish or Belgian Dutch. The second most-spoken language in Belgium is French. The French-speaking community lives in the southern Wallonia region and in the capital Brussels, and this community constitutes approximately 40% (4.5 million) of the population. There is also a tiny German-speaking minority in the eastern regions of the province of Liege (on the border with Germany) and the "Luxembourgish" language is spoken in the province near the border with Luxembourg. In Belgium, an issue is the relations between Dutch and French speakers and you should be sensitive to the tensions that exist.

Men and women shake hands when they meet for the first time. At the first meeting, it is polite to say - nice to meet you ("enchanté" or "aangenaam"). An effort to speak the language (either Dutch or French) is always welcome. Regardless of how you are introduced, you must always be polite and well-mannered. Belgians are careful and prudent and take their time before they fully trust others. Business dealings tend towards bureaucracy with many procedures, formal channels of communication and a great deal of paperwork. The approach is conservative and compromise-oriented so rapid change is difficult to achieve and new ideas may be viewed with suspicion.

For the Flemish, communication is more frank and direct yet informal as the boss mixes with staff and often acts on their ideas. Arrogance or immodesty should be avoided at all costs. The language lends itself to factual descriptions and clear instructions. Facts are important and a low key presentation, using understatement and willingness to compromise goes down well. Bosses are more relaxed and low key as it is generally accepted that decision-making will be consensual.

Communication with the Walloons tends towards a more effusive style (a toned-down Gallic style) with full discussion on all aspects and issues, a flexible agenda and long critical discussions before reaching a decision. Leadership is more akin to the French style where final decisions will be made by the boss.

Humour is used in the business world, but less frequently than in the UK. It may be used at the beginning and end of meetings, but rarely when serious talks are under discussion.