

## Adjusting to American Business Culture

Adapted from University of Maryland <http://www.international.umd.edu/ies/7630> and Philadelphia University <http://www.philau.edu/international/culture.html> and University of Minnesota <http://www.issm.umn.edu/publications/HandBook/HandBook.html>

The United States is a very large country, and Americans come from many cultural backgrounds. You will especially see this diversity in large metropolitan areas like the Washington, DC area. While in the United States, you will probably meet people from many different places, of many different races and ethnicities, and with many different religions and belief systems. Most Americans value the diversity of American culture, and may find it difficult to generalize about American culture. However, there are some basic cultural traits shared by most Americans:

**Cleanliness/Hygiene:** In the United States, we place a strong emphasis on cleanliness. Daily bathing, use of a deodorant, brushing one's teeth twice a day, and fresh clothing are necessities. Americans, therefore, because they are not accustomed to it, find body odor and perspiration offensive. Many people in the United States become uncomfortable when they are in close contact with someone who has noticeable body or mouth odor. Though Americans communicate directly on many topics, they will probably avoid that person rather than discuss the problem. While this may seem excessive to those from other cultures, it is important to remember that personal hygiene can play a major role in professional and social success in the United States. Please consider adjusting your bathing and hygiene routine to accommodate the American preference for the time that you are here. Excessive use of perfumes, however, can be equally offensive to anyone who is allergic to them. As a rule, no odor is better than completely unmasked or excessively masked odors that may otherwise occur naturally.

**Direct Communication/Eye contact:** Americans are more likely to deal with conflicts directly and openly than in some other societies. 'Saving face' is still important in American society, but it is not as important as resolving conflicts and misunderstandings. People tend to communicate directly and openly as much as possible. Americans expect eye contact with interactions and lack of eye contact is a sign of rudeness not respect.

**Informality:** Americans are often very informal in both their dress and interactions with others. People frequently call each other by their first names and should not be seen as a lack of respect. You may call persons your own age and your colleagues by their first names. It is best, however, to address professors and older persons with their title (Dr., Professor, Mr., Mrs., or Ms.) unless they ask you to do otherwise.

**Time Consciousness:** Despite their informality in other aspects of life, Americans are very concerned about time. People are expected to be on time for appointments, classes, and formal social events. Failure to be on time, especially in a professional setting, tends to create a negative impression. If you know you are going to be late for an appointment, you should call and give an explanation.

**Personal Space:** Unlike many other cultures, Americans tend to stand about two or three feet apart when talking to one another, and often feel crowded when closer. If a person feels uncomfortable, then he or she may move away to create more distance. This should not be seen as a sign of rudeness, as they are just re-establishing their personal space.

**Individuality and Self-Reliance:** American society tends to encourage people to think and act individually, to make their own decisions, and to rely on themselves. This does not mean that Americans do not also rely on family and friends for support, or that family and friends are unimportant. It means, rather, that Americans are encouraged to develop themselves and support themselves independently as much as possible.