



Latvia

This month, our attention turns to Latvia. Situated in north-eastern Europe with a coastline along the Baltic Sea, Latvia has borders with Estonia, Russia, Belarus and Lithuania. It has linguistic links with Lithuania to the south and historical and religious ties with Estonia to the north. English is widely understood and German and Russian are spoken as well. The historic centre of its capital, Riga, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site where medieval buildings stand alongside chic coffee shops and modern skyscrapers.

For centuries Latvia was primarily an agricultural country, with fishing and forestry as other important factors in its economy. Like its Baltic neighbours, in the decade after independence from the Soviet Union, Latvia made a rapid transformation to embrace the free market. There is still a core of bureaucrats and managers whose outlook and way of working were formed in the Soviet period.

Corporate culture can be anywhere from very western-style productivity oriented (usually the private sector) to very casual (many government agencies). Latvians value education and experience in order to succeed and it is important to remember that private and professional lives can be intertwined. Generally, Latvians work for their bosses because they have to, but they will work most productively because they like them and the atmosphere created for them at work. Social events at work are important so make all efforts to participate. It will take some time for Latvian employees to warm up to a new foreign boss and even more time before that boss can expect to have an open dialogue with his/her employees. As a new boss makes his/her place in an organisation, it will be important for him/her to get to know the staff through group events, such as a dinner out.

In general, organisations have a vertical hierarchy, but times are changing. Committees are established to review the issues involved, but the final decision remains with the boss. The importance of establishing personal relationships with key colleagues or clients cannot be overstated to help in the decision-making process.

It is best to stick to general topics of introduction in first meetings. Latvians can be reserved and will probably not divulge a great deal of personal information immediately, so while subjects like family and work will not offend, do not be surprised if the conversation does not go very far on these subjects at first. Openness and directness of speech are reserved for people they know well.

Latvians are very proud of their country, especially in light of its recent independence. Good introductory topics could focus on questions about Latvia and asking your new acquaintance's opinion on important places to see, cultural events to attend such as opera and theatre and a bit about general history.

Latvian humour can be hard to detect at first; it takes time to understand the dry wit that is often steeped in cultural references, anecdotes and stories not well known to outsiders.

Latvians will use more formal language but after first formal introductions will move to first-name terms. In meetings with close colleagues, the atmosphere is more familiar and the meeting can resemble a gathering of friends, and it may even be possible that alcohol will be offered.

Many Latvians spend their weekends away from Riga, returning to their home towns to spend time with family and friends. In Latvia, friendship and loyalty are treasured. It may take some time to get to know someone but once you do, the friendship will be very deep. Latvian friends become very involved in each other's lives and very few circumstances will change that.