



Poland

For the next few months, our attention is turning to the Emerging Europe countries starting with Poland, a country in central Europe, bordered by Germany to the west, the Czech Republic and Slovakia to the south, Ukraine and Belarus to the east and, to the north, Lithuania and the Russian province of Kaliningrad. Positioned at the centre of Europe, it has known turbulent and violent times. There have been periods of independence as well as periods of domination by other countries. Several million people, half of them Jews, died in World War II.

A new era began when Poland became an EU member in May 2004, five years after joining Nato and 15 years after the end of communist rule. There has been marked success in creating a market economy and attracting foreign investment. Germany is now Poland's biggest trading partner. There was a movement of workers to western Europe in the years after Poland joined the EU, but the exodus slowed down after the global economic crisis took hold.

First meetings with partners and colleagues are likely to be formal. The polite form of address is *Pan* (Mr) for men, *Pani* (Mrs) for women, on its own, with the last name or with a job title (*Pan Direktor*, for example). Do not shake hands in a doorway as Poles believe it brings bad luck.

In business meetings, Poles usually move fairly quickly to the business issue under discussion. Planning, the timing of future tasks, deadlines and follow-up meetings will be formulated very clearly. A "group wave" when leaving a meeting is not appreciated so make sure to shake hands with everyone individually.

Poles tend to adhere to the traditional perception of a leader's duties and competencies meaning they are hierarchical, highly analytical and focused. People expect to work within clearly established lines of authority. All important decisions will be decided by the senior executive who will consider the best interests of the group/organisation. Although the most senior manager may involve others in decision-making, it is strongly advisable to make contact with him, seeking to get his support. Information flows top down, debate is not always encouraged and there is a low use of a flexible style of management.

The younger businesspeople are highly educated and speak good English in a soft tone. While they may occasionally raise their voices to make a point, they dislike loud and boisterous behaviour. While communication may initially be rather indirect, it will likely become much more direct, to the point of bluntness, once a Pole knows and trusts you. At that point, people may show emotions openly and do not find it difficult to say 'no' if they dislike a request or proposal.

There tends to be little visual or verbal feedback during meetings in Poland. People listen courteously and with little obvious body language being displayed. This does not mean that they are disinterested. Poles tend to wait and think before responding to a point made to them - do not be impatient. Allow Poles the time and space needed to take part fully in the conversation.

Hospitality is a very important aspect of the Polish culture. Traditionally when important guests arrive, they are presented with a loaf of bread on an embroidered towel. A salt holder or cellar is placed on top of the bread loaf or secured in a whole on top of the loaf.

Poles are known for being kind-hearted friendly people who have a strong sense of duty towards each other and their family. It is, for example, very important to show special consideration to senior citizens and less-abled people. In particular, older Poles still value this old-fashioned courtesy. Giving up your seat to an elderly or pregnant women, gentlemen making way for ladies and saying hello and goodbye to people in an elevator is considered normal. Although less common now, even a kiss on the hand of a lady as a way of greeting is a Polish custom.