

## US

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This month, we are reviewing the US, the most technologically powerful economy in the world. US firms are at or near the forefront in technological advances especially in computers, pharmaceuticals and medical, aerospace and military equipment. The US economy, having stood as the largest in the world for more than a century, has slipped into second place behind China.

From the earliest explorers and settlers to the modern day, America has been a nation of immigrants helping to shape and build in critical ways. Initial forays, and then later settlements, were developed by the colonial empires of the British, French, Spanish and Dutch. They co-existed with Native Americans and those of the enslaved African peoples they brought over. Irish, German, Scottish and Scandinavian people were the most notable groups that came next. Then came Italians, Eastern Europeans, and the Chinese, as the industrial revolution came into full swing. They were responsible for building the railroads that would connect the East and West for the first time. Lastly, since World War II, Mexican, Latin American, Middle Eastern, and South Eastern Asian peoples have immigrated in great numbers. Today, many of these people open businesses and have been, in large part, responsible for the construction boom in America's ever-growing economy. As the popular metaphor puts it, America has become a giant melting pot. For this reason, we need to make some generalisations when discussing the business culture of the US.

We all know the US from media, films and music and feel we understand the way things are done there. However, your own perception can be far removed from the reality you experience on the ground. Working in the US is as complex and challenging as in any other international market so don't be lulled into a false sense of security.

The most important American cultural traits you will experience are decisive, directive leadership coupled with loose planning and quick action. Respect for schedules and deadlines are paramount. Decision making is undertaken on an individual basis, within the bounds of his/her individual responsibility and accountability, and adhering to the formal organisational structure.

US business culture often appears rather informal and relaxed but there is a distinct chain of command with regard to decision making. Managers may have the last word in many matters but they seek some form of input from their team and will ask you to explain the reasoning behind your decisions.

To establish yourself as a team leader, you must build a rapport with your team first and convince them that you are the right person for the job. By this, we mean demonstrate your expertise and abilities hands-on, thus setting an example for your employees.

Expatriate staff often tell us how much they resent the need to check their work emails after they have left the office for the day. Even if an email from your boss says no need to respond, the next morning you'll notice your colleagues are talking about the email exchange that happened last night and you'll feel out of the loop. So, take a cue from your colleagues and get yourself up to speed first thing in the morning with anything you may have missed overnight. Moreover, putting in extra hours or being "on call" during your vacation time is by no means unusual.

Business professionals demonstrate a perpetual display of confidence with a close focus on results – especially sales. Money is the motivator and new ideas are generally good ideas. Business agreements are explicitly confirmed in writing. Contracts are legally binding documents and are commonplace in the US. Should a disagreement arise later on, the US side will rely strictly on the terms of the contract. When doing business in the US you should be aware of the fact that for most procedures there are a set of rules and guidelines, state and federal laws, that your US counterpart must follow and that you as business partner also need to adhere to.

The American preference when communicating is to get to the point right away. While many other cultures prefer a circular style with time for background information, Americans prefer your conclusion first then provide them with supplementary details. Overall, people in the US generally value directness, “telling it like it is”. However, in the business context, directness must be delivered with politeness.

Finally, remember to take care to treat everyone equally and refrain from off-colour remarks. Sexual innuendo, as well as all kinds of potentially offensive humour that makes of fun of others is off limits. First of all, this is a matter of basic decency and common courtesy. But what is more, depending on the specific situation, it might also open up you or your company to lawsuits on the grounds of harassment or discrimination.