HOW DO GERMANS TICK?
Intercultural Handbook Germany
A very warm welcome to Germany!

When we hear about Germany, several different pictures come to our minds: the Oktoberfest, Lederhosen, beer, Beethoven and Bach, high quality cars, Schloss Neuschwanstein, World War II as well as the difficulty to get into closer contact with the German people. Those are all clichés about the country and its people which may be wrong or right. Yet, whoever takes a look behind those stereotypes can discover a country that is full of diversity.

Nowadays, Germany is the world's fifth largest economy and the largest in Europe. The economic dynamics are mainly a result of the country’s strength in exports. The country is one of the leading and most progressive producers of iron, steel, coal, cement, chemicals, machineries, vehicles, electronics, food products, ships and textiles. However, as flowery as this may sound, Germany today has to face the same difficulties as many other industrialised countries. Germans describe their economic system as a "social market economy" – providing an array of social services, while encouraging competition and free-enterprise are challenges.

Just as varied as the German industry is its culture. Intercultural competence and a deep understanding of cultural diversity are the keys to success in international business. Different ways of behavior as well as ways of thinking can easily lead to misunderstandings. As a golden rule: Always be open in dealing with foreign cultures, their customs and traditions. The Intercultural Handbook Germany does not want to enforce any stereotypes, but identify tendencies that may apply to a larger share of the German population, but of course not to all.

We wish you an interesting and helpful reading!
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1. What is culture?
"A fish only realizes it needs water to live when it is no longer swimming in water. Our culture is to us like water to the fish. We live and breathe through our culture."

Dr. Fons Trompenaars

Today, various definitions of culture exist. We would like to introduce you to the most common ones in modern intercultural studies. The word "culture" comes from the Latin verb "colere" which stands for the cultivation of soil and plants. It first appeared in the 17th century. Culture stood for things created by man's own will and skill.

Edward T. Hall
"Cultures are unified wholes in which everything interrelates. Any culture is primarily a system for creating, sending, storing and processing information. Communication underlies everything." According to Hall, 80 to 90% of communication are not language, but words, material things and behaviour.

Fons Trompenaars, Geert Hofstede
"Culture is the way in which a group of people solves problems and reconciles dilemmas."
The cultural iceberg

When we see an iceberg, the portion which is visible above water is, in reality, only a small piece of a much larger whole. Similarly, people often think of culture as the numerous observable characteristics of a group that we can "see" with our eyes, be it their food, dances, music, arts or greeting rituals. The reality, however, is that these are merely an external manifestation of the deeper and broader components of culture — the complex ideas and deeply-held preferences and priorities known as attitudes and values.

Deep below the "water line" are a culture’s core values. These internal forces become visible to the casual observer in the form of observable behaviors, such as the words we use, the way we act, the laws we enact, and the ways we communicate with each other. It is also important to note that the core values of a culture do not change quickly or easily. They are passed on from generation to generation by numerous institutions which surround us.
2. German cultural standards & values
What do other Nations think about Germans?

Everywhere, where we meet with different cultures, we make a picture of the other culture and the other culture makes a picture of us.

Generally, this happens spontaneously, without much thought. Very quickly we form an opinion about the other side of certain behaviors or body language signals.

What do other cultures think about the Germans as a rule?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive things</th>
<th>Negative things</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diligence</td>
<td>Perfectionism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correctness</td>
<td>Stubbornness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punctuality</td>
<td>Inflexibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tidiness</td>
<td>No sense of humor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>Know-it-alls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honesty</td>
<td>Unfriendliness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>Reserved behavior</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Stiffness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# German cultural standards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task orientation</th>
<th>Motivation for actions: facts, results, circumstances, control of emotions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appreciation of structures and rules</td>
<td>Narrow interpretation of laws and rules to minimize risks and changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time management</td>
<td>Systematic, linear, long-term planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separation of life spheres</td>
<td>Strict separation of private and work life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal control</td>
<td>Guilt culture, self control through existing rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of an abstract &quot;common good&quot;</td>
<td>Everybody has to carry out his / her duty to make the whole system work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explicit and direct communication, low context</td>
<td>Very direct and explicit communication, little reading between the lines</td>
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# German business values

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Behaviour</th>
<th>View from external</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Punctuality</td>
<td>Keeping deadlines, not letting someone wait</td>
<td>Inflexible, impatient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security</td>
<td>Financial and other risks covered by insurance</td>
<td>Over-anxious, dislike risks, inflexible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privacy, Individualism</td>
<td>Building friendships slowly; preserving distance at first; separation of job and private sphere</td>
<td>Emotional distance, cold, selfish, lack of humour, serious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline, Diligence, Reliability, Accountability</td>
<td>&quot;Do it 100% or not at all&quot;, high-quality work, perfectionism</td>
<td>Workaholics, inflexible, arrogant, to be a know-it-all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Straightforwardness, Honesty</td>
<td>Clear statements</td>
<td>Aggressive, undiplomatic, crude</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Honesty & commitment

Honesty and commitment are one of the strongest behavioural values of the Germans. Accepting and implementing these, you can gain a longterm and trustful relationship in Germany.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN IN GERMANY?

- Being able to "look someone into the eye"
- Commitment and reliability are as important as professional competence to create trust and respect
- A lack of trust makes cooperation and personal relationships impossible

WHAT CAN YOU DO WITH GERMANS?

- Germans associate a firm handshake and steady eye contact with confidence, commitment and honesty
- Communicate in a straightforward manner: A "yes" is a "yes" and a "no" has to be openly communicated
- Communicate problems, uncertainties and doubts early before a deadline
- Be punctual and stick to deadlines, don't cancel appointments last minute
- See a contract / decision / agreement etc. as something fixed and binding
- Accept being criticized; taking responsibility for one's actions is considered professional behavior
3. Business life
3.1 Building trust - Task orientation

What is more important in business negotiations and to gain trust? To create a pleasant working climate, or to be matter-of-fact and deal with issues as promptly and efficiently as possible? In some cultures people concentrate primarily on the task to be completed, while in others creating and maintaining a good relationship amongst the individuals involved is the main focus.

Germans are regarded as being rather task oriented. All parties concerned should derive clear benefits from working together. The focus is on the deal and, as a rule, personal relationships arise only once business matters have been agreed. At the beginning, you should be careful talking about private matters to business partners. First comes business, and only gradually will Germans open up to talks about private life.

As a general rule, formal written contracts count as being more binding than personal commitments.

Germany shows clear elements of an individualist society. Compared to most Asian and Eastern European countries, for example, an individual in Germany has a relatively strong position in the group. People tend to be more interested in dealing with their own concerns, giving priority to their personal objectives and being inclined to highlight their own achievements and success. A strong personality and self-assurance are perfectly respectable character traits. Private and business matters are kept separate. Asking colleagues personal questions is only advisable after you have known them for a long time, as they can very quickly view this as an undue intrusion into their private life. The individualistic orientation of Germans can also be seen in the standard family structure, which is typically a ‘core family’ consisting of just two generations, generally with only a small number of children.
3.2 Greetings and address

In Germany, it is customary to greet people by shaking hands (regardless of the gender) and looking the other person directly in the eyes. The common forms of greeting are "Guten Morgen" (up until approx. 10-11am) and "Guten Tag" (after 11am). More casual forms are "Hallo" and "Hi". You take your leave by saying "Auf Wiedersehen" or, amongst friends, "Tschüss". Only between friends, kisses on the cheeks and hugs are becoming more and more popular, although there are no set rules of etiquette.

As a basic rule, people in Germany address each other on a surname-basis and with the formal address of "you", i.e. "Sie". Germans, including close colleagues who share an office, often continue using the formal "Sie".

The use of "Du" is generally proposed by the older or more senior of the two people concerned.

When addressing people with academic titles, there are also rules about whether these should be included or omitted. In Germany, the title "Doctor" or "Professor" is essentially part of a person's name and should also be included in the form of address. Such titles should be used directly adjacent to the name, e.g. "Frau Professor X" or "Herr Doktor X".

The title may only be omitted if "in official situation" specifically requested by the person who is to be addressed. The normal form of address is always "Herr" or "Frau", followed by the surname.
3.3 Business contacts

For Germans, life consists of two largely separate areas: their public (professional) life and their private life. In public, cool correctness is the order of the day. In private, people like to be easy-going and informal. As a foreigner you will initially only get glimpses of the public Germany. Once you are in the inner circle of a German person, you will probably have gained a friend for life.

As contacts are vital when doing business in Germany, make a point of remembering the surname of every person who could give you or your company a good reference. After the first initial contact, the Germans like a fairly personal approach, especially when business contact will take place over a longer period of time. Meaningful conversation is appreciated as a way to come closer to each other, once business has been completed. However, even though a good and friendly relationship with others are important, task orientation prevails and an efficient approach is very much valued.

As the Germans attach high importance to the efficient use of time, make sure you inform your counterpart well in advance about a planned meeting or an intended appointment. If you know that you will be late for an appointment, be sure to phone ahead and give a plausible excuse.
3.4 Presentation and negotiations

A meeting without an agenda is a very rare event in Germany. The sequence in which contributions are made to discussions does not necessarily have to be in order of hierarchical seniority. What is expected – and provided – are sound, purely factual contributions. Wild gesticulation or discussions conducted in an aggressive manner are not appreciated.

From a German perspective, presentations should be prepared in multimedia form with particular attention to detail (visual format, exact numbers): the current situation is analysed, options are presented and, ideally, at the end concrete recommendations or instructions are provided. Key information is summarised in writing in the form of hand-outs / presentation packs, etc. Jokes, cartoons and the like are largely seen as unnecessary distractions.

A feature of task-oriented societies such as Germany is that its members are particularly focussed on the outcome during negotiations. As achieving objectives is very important, only a concrete outcome is seen as a success, and results are expected to be achieved by the end of the meeting. If there is time left after business has been dealt with, this is the time to take care of building relationships. However, one thing is certainly important before any deal can be closed: German business people need to have the feeling that they are in possession of all the relevant information (background facts, figures, market analyses, etc.). It is not usual to criticise competitors – the product should speak for itself.
3.5 Business dress

The type of clothing is dependent on a given person's position within the company. However, value is undoubtedly attached to dressing correctly and appropriately, without attracting attention. In general the dress code is quite modest – people have a slight fear of appearing bigger than they really are. In terms of choosing discrete forms of dress, for men it is usually expected to display a well-groomed appearance and, depending on their position and the industry they are in, wear either work clothes or a dark suit with an appropriate, inconspicuous tie. The dominant colours at boardroom level are blue, grey, black and brown. A female employee's outfit should neither be too elegant nor too chic. In general, the rule for women is only to wear skirts or dresses that come down to at least just over the knee. Plunging necklines should also be avoided and very high or spike heels are rarely seen in German offices.
3.6 Communication

Communication is an essential part of interaction, so this dimension necessarily overlaps with the other dimensions which all involve communication. There are significant differences, however, in how directly or indirectly members of different cultures express themselves. This is particularly noticeable in how people give instructions and convey criticism.

In cultures with a preference for direct communication, people are expected to take a clear position and openly express their opinion, even if it involves criticism or confrontation. On the other hand, other cultures avoid directly expressing opinions.

Germany is one of the so-called "low-context" cultures. All details are transmitted explicitly. This means that Germans tend to pay more attention to the literal meaning of words than to the context surrounding them. Messages are transmitted more by words than nonverbal signals. If in doubt, a German will ask a follow-up question in order to get all of the information, even if this could perhaps have been deduced implicitly.
Dining Etiquette

In German business life, a business lunch with colleagues or business partners is a good opportunity to continue discussions in a relaxed atmosphere. Therefore, in contrast to other cultures, talking about business topics during lunch is quite usual. Very often such discussions take place at lunch time. On special occasions, however, colleagues or partners also meet for dinner in the evening to celebrate, for instance.

In Germany people invite each other to their houses far less frequently than in other countries. It is generally not usual to drop in on someone unannounced on the spur of the moment for a cup of tea or a glass of wine. An invitation for 7 or 8 pm generally means you will be having an evening meal.

You should not arrive too early or more than 15 minutes late. Punctuality is especially important if you are going to be eating. It is usual to bring along a small gift. The easiest present is always a bouquet of flowers, however before handing them to your hostess you should always take them out of the paper wrapping. The following flowers are not advisable: white chrysanthemums, which have funereal overtones and red roses, which are used as a declaration of love. You could also bring a bottle of wine.
3.8 Perception of hierarchy

Different cultures have different ways of dealing with the perceived distance between the powerful and the powerless. Although social inequality can be found everywhere, there are significant variations in how people respond to it.

In cultures with a low-level perception of hierarchy, people try to minimize social differences and strive for equality. In cultures with a high-level perception of hierarchy, differences in status are accepted as the norm, especially by those with lower status or position.

Contrary to the widespread stereotype, hierarchical thinking in Germany is relatively unpronounced. Authority is not accepted per se, but is derived from a person’s competence and personality. A manager fulfils a functional role within an organisation, generally that of someone who delegates tasks. This is accepted without being questioned as long as the manager shows through his or her ability and commitment that he or she is up to the job. Hierarchies tend to be flat with the boss tending to embody the idealised character of a "primus inter pares", involving his staff in decisions. It is for this reason that business cards are handed over in a rather relaxed fashion in Germany. Germans take it for granted that anyone sent out to represent their company is regarded as being authorised to act on its behalf and qualified for the task at hand, regardless of their position in the company according to their business card.

Understatement also belongs to the modest power divide in Germany. Pretentious behaviour or making a show of power (or wealth) is not welcome, i.e. those in positions of power act as though they are less powerful than they really are.
3.8
Time management

The pace of life as well as management and perception of time varies widely from culture to culture. Different attitudes towards time in everyday life can potentially lead to intercultural misunderstandings amongst business partners.

Single-focused time cultures tend to plan tasks in a linear way, while in multi-focused time cultures the timing of tasks to be carried out depends far more on the person.

In German culture, time is seen as a firmly fixed concept. This leads to linear scheduling, whereby jobs are worked through step-by-step, one after the other and it is extremely rare to do different jobs at the same time. The entire scheduling process is oriented around the job and the primary focus is not on the person doing it but on the outcome.

Therefore, essential elements for such planning include fixed dates and deadlines which are adhered to as precisely as possible. Distractions and interruptions – no matter what sort – are perceived as extremely disruptive. Linear time planning also requires a high degree of punctuality. The maximum period of lateness that is generally accepted is a quarter of an hour, although this can be also seen as impolite – even in private life.

In terms of their perception of time, Germans are less focussed on the present than other nations. They are conscious of their past but oriented towards the future. The past plays a major role and people live with a very pronounced awareness of history. Focussing on the future, however, is also of key significance. Looking after the elderly (state pensions, etc.) is perceived by the public as an important topic and companies often plan for and invest into this well in advance. Reinvesting profit is usually preferred to taking short-term financial gain. Holidays are often planned many months in advance.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occasion</th>
<th>Tolerance</th>
<th>Announcement will be...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business meeting</td>
<td>Arriving 5 minutes before, punctual</td>
<td>&quot;um&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private meeting</td>
<td>5 minutes late are tolerable</td>
<td>&quot;um&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private invitation for dinner</td>
<td>5-15 minutes late are usually OK</td>
<td>&quot;um&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private invitation for a party</td>
<td>Anytime starting with the appointed time is OK</td>
<td>&quot;ab&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Small talk creates harmony in working and in private life. However, establishing personal ties as the basis of every business relationship is in Germany often underestimated!

For most Germans, Small talk is a waste of time. Small talk is one of the greatest casualties of German efficiency. Germans, in general, are a direct culture, skipping all unnecessary chat and getting right to the point. They are said trying to be effective in what they are doing - that’s why most of Germans don’t think it is necessary to small talk as it costs time without producing measurable results.

For early encounters following Small talk topics ca be used or better not:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Small Talk - Suitable</th>
<th>Small Talk - Taboo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational background</td>
<td>Nazi Regime (“3rd Reich”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career, professional tasks</td>
<td>“Very” private questions (marriage, kids etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work-related ideas and concepts</td>
<td>Asking someone his age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One’s achievements</td>
<td>Income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One’s beliefs and ideas</td>
<td>Political preferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>Religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Events in society/ sports</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What has happened on the weekend</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
4. Dos & Don‘ts

DO

- Greet people when you meet them for the first time in the day (e.g. "Guten Morgen", "Guten Tag", "Guten Abend") followed by "Herr" or "Frau" and the family name.
- Introduce yourself when you meet people for the first time and shake hands firmly.
- Make an effort by yourself to become acquainted with people during coffee breaks and at lunchtime.
- Communicate directly and tell your opinion. This is a virtue to be taught to little children and is considered an expression of honesty and sincerity.
- Information and instructions should be rather extensive, clearly structured and also mostly confirmed in writing, even if an oral transmission has taken place.
- Be sure to meet deadlines or appointments. Distractions or interruptions – of whatever kind – are bothersome.
- Be always on time, but not way too early. Punctuality is very important, both in private and business life.
- The type of business attire is dependent on the position in the company. In general, however, you should pay attention to adequate and correct, but rather inconspicuous clothing.
- If you are invited for dinner, bring a gift, such as flowers or wine.
DON'T

- Use recent German history as a topic for small talk.
- Call older people or colleagues by their first names and "Du", unless they have offered you this privilege (young people tend to be much more informal).
- Be shy to ask questions, if you do not understand something.
- Private and business are usually treated separately. If you do not know your partner, do not ask too personal questions. This will very quickly be perceived as an intrusion into the private sphere.
- Come too late to a meeting. The maximum delay for a quarter of an hour is generally accepted, but can also be perceived as rude.
- Take the German direct way of speaking personally. Criticism is usually expressed bluntly.
- Gesticulate a lot in a business meeting or carry out any aggressive discussions.
5.
Impressum

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