

## **Business Etiquette in Britain**

By [Terri Morrison](#)

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While we may share a common language, dealing with clients or colleagues in the U.K. requires respect for some subtle differences between North American and British business practices.

### **Regions, customs and accents**

England is only one part of the entity known as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Most of the United Kingdom's international business is conducted through England. Britain refers to the island on which England, Wales and Scotland are located. Although the English are in the habit of referring to all natives of Britain as "Brits," this term is not appreciated by many Welsh, Irish and Scots. Although U.K. countries are members of the European Union, the British do not consider themselves "European." This is vital when discussing issues regarding the E.U.

Northern Ireland shares the island of Éire with the Republic of Ireland. Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom, while the Republic of Ireland is not. It is both incorrect and insulting to call someone from the Republic of Ireland (also known as Éire, Southern Ireland, the Free State or the South) a Brit.

Each of the four constituent parts of the United Kingdom (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) has a distinct history, culture and ancestral language. There are also separatist pressures pulling each of these regions apart, so be sensitive to the ethnic heritage of your associates. Great Britain's devolution of powers has continued over the last decade. The Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh opened in 1999, as did the National Assembly for Wales in Cardiff.

In the U.K., one's private life is just that. Do not try to interrogate your British colleagues with personal questions while you're at work. Even asking where someone is from (something that is obvious to other people from the U.K., based on accent) may appear intrusive and can make a foreign businessperson look a bit desperate for conversation. True English friendships are few and specific; do not try to become chummy during contract negotiations.

While there is a "Standard Oxbridge" or "BBC English accent" that most foreigners recognize, a multitude of other accents and dialects are common as well. Just 10 minutes outside London, pronunciation begins to change. In the United Kingdom alone, there are well over 30 dialects, including Cockney, Scouse, Geordie, West Country, East Anglia, Birmingham (aka Brummy or Brummie), South Wales, Edinburgh, Belfast, Cornwall, Cumberland and Devonshire.

### **Punctuality, appointments and local time**

Always be punctual. In London, traffic can make this difficult, so allow plenty of time to get to your appointment. Schedule your visit at least a few days ahead of time, then confirm your appointment upon arrival. In the U.K., there are established rules for everything, which gives a sense of stability to

the lives of locals. The English are very time-oriented and may become anxious about deadlines and results.

There are no designated national holidays in England, but workers enjoy several weeks' worth of official holidays in the United Kingdom, including a number of bank holidays. Visit [kissboworshakehands.com/2008demo](http://kissboworshakehands.com/2008demo) for the official holidays in 100 countries. The English are on Greenwich Mean Time, also known as GMT.

## **Negotiating**

An oral agreement may be considered binding, followed by written confirmation. Generally, only major agreements require legal procedures. Be discreet when you suggest contacting an attorney (called a solicitor in the United Kingdom).

The best way to make contact with senior executives is through a third party. The hierarchy in business is as follows: the managing director (equivalent to a CEO in the U.S.), the director (corporate vice president), the divisional officers, the deputy directors and the managers.

Business people are normally more interested in short-term results than in long-term prospects. The British do not necessarily see change as a good thing. Generally speaking, the British do not often reveal excitement or other emotions (except at soccer matches, when anything can happen). Try to stay understated as well. Similarly, the British tend to refrain from extravagant claims about products or plans.

Some British executives stereotype U.S. business people as condescending. To be safe, make every effort to avoid this impression. Avoid the hard sell. Decision-making is slower in the U.K. than in the U.S., so do not rush your British colleagues toward a decision. Allow British executives to suggest that a meeting has finished, and do not prolong your exit.

While U.S. executives are known for being direct, the British are even more so. Don't be offended if there's no hedging about whether your suggestion is good or not.

Avoid the typical U.S. conversation starter "What do you do?" The British may feel this question is too personal. Avoid controversial topics, such as politics or religion, and do not discuss comparative work ethics. Speak in complete sentences. Many U.S. executives have a habit of starting a sentence, then allowing it to trail off without ever completing the thought.

While the British are often self-critical, visitors should avoid joining in any criticisms—simply listen. Similarly, if they share their complaints with you, do not participate. The British apologize often, even for minor inconveniences. They also have a habit of adding a question to the end of a sentence. For example: "It's a lovely day, isn't it?"

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