

TIME IS MONEY, RIGHT? WHY NOT EVERY COUNTRY HAS THE SAME ATTITUDE TO TIME

The image of Japanese railway officials bowing to passengers to apologize for the late running of their train shows the importance the Japanese place on time. Americans like to get to the point in a business meeting as time is money. But not every country treats time in the same way. Read on to discover how time across cultures differs around the world.

The ensuing world headlines combined with a begrudging respect and acknowledgement of Japanese culture highlighted how differently time is treated in Japan compared to other cultures where being late is the norm. Understanding how time is viewed by different cultures is vital if you wish to work across cultures and borders and be successful.

So, how do our cultural values impact our time management?

Punctuality-conscious countries like Germany, Switzerland and America live by the culture of the clock. Take the American “time is money” attitude, for instance. Their equating time with money can be clearly seen in their choice of words where they spend time, save time or waste time.

Time, therefore, is an expensive commodity to be used wisely for them. Values such as progress, success and achievement that are held in high regard are based on adherence to time-keeping. Academic and professional assignments are timetabled and obey strict time deadlines.

However, many African, Asian and even European countries like Italy or Spain that perceive time as more cyclical, regulated by rotating moons and seasons, are much more laid back. Ancient countries such as India and Egypt, that have existed for thousands of years, evaluate time very differently. They, unlike the Japanese for instance, do not consider minutes, even hours or days, as desperately critical.

So, when these two cultures meet, inevitably there is often a clash in attitudes and behavior.

MEETINGS

Punctuality in attending meetings in countries such as Japan and Germany does not mean coming on time. That is considered late. You need to arrive at least ten minutes early so that the meeting can start on time. Doing otherwise is considered rude and unprofessional. It not only causes you to lose face, a big “no no” in such cultures, but you would cause others to lose face by showing disrespect thereby compounding your faux pas.

This could have serious consequences with the person losing trust in you and even resulting in you losing their relationship. On the other hand, in countries such as India, it is the norm to arrive late for meetings anticipating the others would do too. The feeling is there is no sense in being on time and find you have to twiddle your thumbs until the others arrive. The problem of course arises when Indians, Italians or Arabs, for example, have to meet with the Japanese, the Swiss or the Germans where the concept of time management differ reflecting their cultural values.

ATTITUDE REGARDING PROFESSIONALISM

In countries like Britain, it is perfectly acceptable for employees to leave at the end of their working day, be it 5 PM or 7 PM.

In other European countries like Italy or Greece, they might leave earlier. People are required to work for a fixed number of hours after which their thoughts might turn to family or dinner. The value they put on their private lives are as important as work. So leaving early, although their colleagues may not have finished for the day, is not considered unprofessional.

In contrast, the Japanese employees feel duty-bound to stay until their superior does, even if that means staying on till after 10pm. This does not necessarily reflect positively on effective use of time neither does it mean they work until they leave. Even sleeping on the job is appreciated as they can be perceived as someone who is exhausted from working hard and long hours.

In Japan, the clock does not dictate how much, how hard or how long you work, but leaving early is never the way to make it to the top. Family and other personal matters are not allowed to interfere with work which takes priority.

TIME ACROSS CULTURES: TIME VS RELATIONSHIPS

In countries where time is a precious commodity, bonding or relationships may take second place. For instance, ideally the Americans would want to start and finish their discussions, tie up all the loose ends and have the contract signed and sealed by the end of the first meeting itself. But for the Japanese or the Arabs, the first meeting is more about establishing a bond of trust and understanding.

The business can follow later. They are happy to ignore the clock and stretch the meeting, even take it outside the office to a restaurant, a bar or a karaoke bar to get to know each other first. Cultural values such as courtesy, propriety and tradition take priority. It is possible, if these are ignored, that they may want to take their business elsewhere. Therefore, a great deal of patience would be required of the Americans with their “cards on the table” attitude.

You simply cannot hurry your counterparts. In Japan, even the initial formal exchange of business cards takes a couple of minutes. If you thrust your card into your counterpart’s hand and grab theirs and then stuff it into your pocket without studying it carefully, you lose face, cause them to lose theirs, and in the bargain you may lose their business. There can be serious consequences in not understanding how much time to allot to an important business ritual due to lack of understanding their cultural values.

The impact of contrasting attitudes towards time management based on differing cultural values can be one party perceiving the other as being irresponsible, unprofessional and even lazy, and in turn being perceived as lacking in courtesy and being emotionally cold.

The questions that arise in doing business with and among multinationals are, which cultures should dominate; who should change and adapt: those that schedule, segment and manage time to the extent of being ruled by it or those that are not controlled by precise calendars and schedules and take a more relaxed approach to managing time? Ultimately it boils down to which is the stronger or weaker culture as well as who needs the business more.

The way for both sides to emerge winners is to have a clear understanding and empathy, not necessarily sympathy, for those from a different culture with different values. This requires a degree of tolerance and patience. Yet, in the longer term, if each side is non-judgemental and agrees to meet half-way, both doing business and building relationships can be successful and satisfactory and time across cultures becomes just one more thing that you have to agree on.

CHRONEMIC

Chronemics is the study of the use of time, and the way that time is perceived and valued by individuals and cultures, particularly as regards non-verbal communication. These time perceptions include things like punctuality, willingness to wait, approaches to face-to-face interactions, and reactions to time pressure.

Different cultures may be considered to be:

Monochronic – where things are typically done one at a time, where time is segmented into precise, small units, and where time is scheduled, arranged and managed. In such a culture, time is viewed as a tangible commodity that can be spent, saved or wasted, and a paramount value is placed on regimented schedules, tasks and “getting the job done”. This perception of time is probably rooted in the Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th Century, and the archetypal examples are the United States, Germany and Switzerland, to which could be added Britain, Canada, Japan, South Korea, Turkey, and the Scandinavian countries.

Polychronic – where several things can be done at once, and a more fluid approach is taken to scheduling time. Such cultures tend to be less focused on the precise accounting of each and every moment, and much more steeped in tradition and relationships rather than in tasks. Polychronic cultures have a much

less formal perception of time, and are not ruled by precise calendars and schedules. The arbitrary divisions of clock time and calendars have less importance to them than the cycle of the seasons, the invariant pattern of rural and community life, and the calendar of religious festivities. Many Latin American, African, Asian and Arab cultures fall into this category, especially countries like Mexico, Pakistan, India, rural China, the Philippines, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Variably Monochronic – a group of “in between” countries, including Russia, Southern Europe and much of East-Central Europe are sometimes referred to as variably monochronic cultures.

Even within a country, different sub-cultures may regard time quite differently. In the United States for example, Mexican-Americans differentiate between “hora inglesa” (the actual time on the clock) and “hora Mexicana” (which treats time considerably more casually); Hawaiians regularly juggle two time systems, the rigorous Haole (American) time and the much more lax Hawaiian time; and native Americans often distinguish between “Indian time” and regular time.

In today’s globalized world, understanding the time orientation of a culture is critical to the successful handling of diplomatic and business situations. Misunderstandings of chronemics can lead to a failure to understand intentions, especially in business communication. For example, monochronists may view polychronists as undisciplined, lazy, irresponsible and untrustworthy, while polychronists may consider monochronists to be obsessed with rules and formalities, and emotionally cold.

TIME IN DIFFERENT CULTURES

Attitudes to time may differ between different cultures in often quite significant ways. For example, being late for an appointment, or taking a long time to get down to business, is the accepted norm in most Mediterranean and Arab countries, as well as in much of less-developed Asia. Such habits, though, would be anathema in punctuality-conscious USA, Japan, England, Switzerland, etc. In the Japanese train system, for example, “on time” refers to expected delays of less than one minute, while in many other countries, up to fifteen minutes leeway is still considered “on-time”.

Cultural attitudes to time also differ throughout history. The pace of modern Western life, with its fast food, express delivery, instant coffee, sell-by dates, speed-dating, speed-dialling, etc, as well as our reliance on clocks and the constant time pressure we seem to find ourselves under, would probably be absolutely incomprehensible to someone just a hundred years ago. Before transcontinental railways and the telegraph and the introduction of Standard Time in the 1880s (see the section on Time Standards), different countries, states, and even neighbouring towns, kept their own time with no attempt at consistency. Even though clocks, and later watches, were widely available, much of the world still estimated their time by the natural rhythms of the Sun and Moon until late into the 19th Century.

READING COMPREHENSION

- 1) In _____, even the initial formal exchange of business cards takes a couple of minutes.
- 2) In countries such as India, it is the norm to arrive late for meetings anticipating the others would do too. TRUE or FALSE and justify.

- 3) They, unlike the _____ for instance, do not consider minutes, even hours or days, as desperately critical.
- 4) Punctuality-conscious countries like _____, Switzerland and America live by the culture of the clock.

5) Punctuality in attending meetings in countries such as Japan and Germany does not mean coming on _____.

6) In Japan, even the initial formal exchange of business cards takes a couple of minutes. Many Latin American, African, Asian and Arab cultures fall into this category, especially countries like Mexico, Pakistan, India, rural China, the Philippines, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. TRUE or FALSE and justify.

7) Explain the following with an example: 'In countries where time is a precious commodity, bonding or relationships may take second place.'

8) In other European countries like Italy or _____, they might leave earlier.

9) Explain the following with an example: 'Attitudes to time may differ between different cultures in often quite significant ways.'

10) Take the _____ “time is money” attitude, for instance.

11) Explain the following with an example: 'Misunderstandings of chronemics can lead to a failure to understand intentions, especially in business communication.'

Culture Shock: Punctuality : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6fz6pl5xo5M>

According to the video, what were some of the problems were presented according to time.