

Avoid Faux Pas with Corporate Etiquette Tips from ACC’s Global Membership

Community

Career Development



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Imagine, you've joined the kick-off call for a new contract negotiation with a partner in the United Kingdom. Trying to sound in the know, you mention some recent drama with the royal family, only to be greeted with silence. Your friendly attempt at putting your best foot forward may have unintentionally put your foot in your mouth.

The strength of ACC's global membership was showcased in a recent webinar with representatives from the United Kingdom, South America, and the Asia-Pacific region. They discussed working across cultures and best practices for each region — so you won't have to worry about looking foolish in front of your new colleagues.

At the onset, moderator Serra Aladag, director, compliance counsel, Hinge Health, and a member of ACC Southern California, noted that there are universal rules of corporate etiquette every in-house counsel should respect.

Universal rules of corporate etiquette

Professional appearance

Your appearance includes clothing, accessories, haircut, and grooming, and all combine for a head-to-toe professional presence. Ignoring one aspect doesn't work. While dress sometimes varies by industry — with finance typically favoring suits, for example — most companies expect you to have a

clean, professional appearance.

Punctuality

While meeting etiquette varies around the world, it is generally a good idea to show up on time.

Effective communication

Body language and tone have a big impact — often bigger than the actual words spoken, particularly if there is a spoken language barrier.

Emotional and social intelligence

Emotional and social intelligence is the art of self-regulation. Learn to lead with empathy and kindness and build connections to others to foster goodwill and trust.

Table manners

Put away your phone. Only eat once others are served. Don’t order the most expensive meal if you’re the guest. Treat the waitstaff with respect. It’s everything your parents taught you but in a business setting!

Respect for customs and traditions

Be curious. If you are presented with a gift in a business setting, be polite and honest if your company has a no-gift policy but also show appreciation for the thought. Sometimes you may have to go along with the culture. For example, in Turkiye, drinking tea is often part of business deals. Even if you don’t like the taste of tea, it may be preferable to accept and sip politely, rather than getting the meeting off on the wrong note.

Watch the full webinar on-demand!

Regional corporate etiquette



Russell Hunter, Head of Legal & Regulatory Compliance, *Clear Channel* (ACC Europe - England/UK)

United Kingdom

Communication

Communication is often indirect and polite, but risks misleading non-British people (e.g., “that’s interesting” or “maybe I’m wrong…”). “Please” and “thank you” are used extensively.

Punctuality

Being on time is crucial and seen as a sign of respect and professionalism.

Hierarchical structures

Hierarchical, but with a strong emphasis on teamwork and collaboration.

Business attire

Conservative and professional dress is standard. Suits are common in formal business settings. Some sectors, like media or tech, have a more informal style.

Formalities and manners

The British like proper greetings and handshakes, but will quickly move to using first names in meetings.



Verma Vijita, Senior Corporate Counsel, *Infosys* (ACC Europe - England/UK)

Northern Europe

Communication

Communication is straightforward and direct, particularly in the Netherlands. Clarity and conciseness are valued.

Punctuality

Being on time for meetings is crucial and seen as a sign of respect and reliability.

Hierarchical structures

Scandinavia and the Netherlands have flat structures, while Belgium is more hierarchical. Expertise is valued.

Business attire

Formal attire is typical in Belgium and the Netherlands, while Scandinavia and Finland prefer business casual. However, you should always look “well-turned out.”

National pride

You will often hear locals complaining about their countries. Never join in!

**Ignacio Salguero**, Data Protection Officer - Latin America, *Chubb* (ACC Argentina)

Spain

Communication

Expect more indirect and nuanced communication. Reading between the lines and understanding context is important.

Punctuality

While being on time is appreciated, there is generally more flexibility around punctuality compared to Northern Europe.

Hierarchical structures

Spanish businesses have clear hierarchical structures. Respect for authority and seniority is expected.

Business attire

Professional and stylish attire is important. Dressing well is seen as a sign of respect.

Relationship building

Personal relationships are crucial. Invest time in getting to know your counterparts and building trust rather than trying to get straight to business.



Brenda Puig, Head of Legal - Marketplace & Shipping, *Mercado Libre* (ACC Argentina)

Argentina and Brazil

Communication

Compared to the United States and European countries, communication in Argentina and Brazil tends to be more straightforward.

Punctuality

While starting meetings on time is expected and appreciated, there is a certain flexibility. For ending the meeting, it’s even more flexible. Particularly in Brazil, it is common for meetings to go beyond the agreed ending time.

Greetings

Expect a lot of kisses and touching (in a good way). There’s no personal bubble. People are warm and personal.

Australia

Communication

There’s normally not much emphasis on formal greetings; a handshake and smile are usually enough. It is common to address parties by their first names. Australians value modesty, and like to get to the point. They love to debate. Do not take it personally. It is common for Aussies to respond with humor if challenged with a controversial topic. Decisions tend to be made collaboratively and non-hierarchically compared to Asia.

**Lily Tsen**, General Counsel, *Amcor Flexibles Asia Pacific* (ACC Singapore)

Relationship building

It is common for attendees to be invited to a bar after a meeting concludes. But Aussies tend to avoid talking about business at the bar unless someone else starts the topic.

Business attire

Australian lawyers commonly wear dark, conservative business suits. Dresses are common for women.

Singapore

Communication

Direct yet polite; ensuring the other party “saves face” is important.

Relationship building

Personal relationships are crucial. Invest time in getting to know your counterparts and building trust rather than trying to get straight to business. Dinner invitations are typical, and having drinks with your colleagues is a normal way to build relationships.

Language

English is used in business. With more business being conducted in China, the ability to speak Mandarin comes in handy.

**Abigail Tan,** Senior Corporate Counsel, *Elastic N.V.* (ACC Singapore)

India

Communication

Often indirect and polite, Indians aim to avoid confrontation (e.g., “We’ll try” or “Let’s see”). Frequent use of “please” and “thank you” shows respect and courtesy. Pay attention to nonverbal cues and subtle hints.

Hierarchical structures

There is clear respect for authority and titles. Teamwork and collaboration are emphasized, but deference to seniority is common.

Business attire

Suits are typical in formal settings. Business casual is acceptable in some sectors like IT and startups; traditional attire may be worn during festivals. Geographical dress attire is respected and not out of the norm. When visiting India check the region and consider why you are visiting and dress appropriately.

Gifting

Gifts are part of business culture, especially during festivals like Diwali and Holi. Gifts should be tasteful and appropriate. Avoid personal gifts.

6 key takeaways

1. Educate yourself on universally accepted corporate etiquette.
2. Research countries and their local customs before starting legal negotiations and expanding into new territories.
3. Prioritize respect for other cultures and traditions.
4. Familiarize yourself with dining practices.
5. Review your closet and take stock of your work attire.
6. Cultivate civility, collaboration, and kindness in all your business dealings.

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