

Fact Sheet: Swedish Business Culture

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Introduction

When talking about business cultures, the first thing to remember is that there is no “true” right or wrong. Just as different countries speak different languages, people do business differently in different places.

This fact sheet describes Swedes as others see them. The norms and behaviour are not written in stone, but it gives you a hint on what to be expected. Studying the Swedish business culture from a foreign perspective is in many cases necessary in order to avoid miscommunication, which can be devastating for your business.

Sweden is a small country in size, but big in terms of business. The country has a wide spectrum of well-developed industries and a strong position as a welfare state based on egalitarianism – a concept that has influenced the Swedish business culture. Hence, if you would like to do successful business with Sweden, there are certain unwritten rules you should memorise and apply.

DOs and DON'Ts When Doing Business With Sweden

- *All agreements in writing and signed*

Your Swedish contact will want any agreement you have made with him or her put in writing and signed. Do not see this as a sign that the Swede distrusts you or your countrymen. In general, it is simply company policy to always get all agreements in writing and signed.



- *Come to all meetings on time*

If you have booked a time for a meeting with a Swede, be there on time. Punctuality is a sign of respect and efficiency. Being exactly on time will make a good impression and it will indicate that you are reliable and trustworthy.

- *Be honest in all things*

Swedes expect everyone they work with to be honest. If you should not keep your word, try to cheat the Swede or try to

get a bribe of some sort, this will most likely ruin the business relationship with the Swede. Swedish companies avoid doing business with any person considered dishonest or not trustworthy.

- *Be well prepared for meetings and speak in turns*

Meetings with Swedish companies usually have the characteristics of an open debate. However, this does not mean that they are spontaneous. The meetings are expected to be well prepared with a clear agenda. Showing up without any pre-planning is considered disrespectful to the members present and a waste of their time and work. Take time to speak in turns and try not to interrupt others.

- *Do not be over-ambitious when estimating delivery times and inform of delays right away*

If you are estimating a time plan as to when an order can be delivered to Sweden, it is best not to give an unrealistically early date in the hope of impressing your Swedish business contact. Deadlines are set to keep and Swedes often expect the delivery exactly when you promised. If there is an unexpected delay in delivery, you must inform your Swedish business contact immediately. Otherwise you risk losing their trust and they might not want to deal with you again.

- *Uncommon to give and receive valuable gifts*

The giving and receiving of valuable gifts is not common among business contacts in Sweden. The tax laws in Sweden make it difficult for someone to give or receive valuable gifts as a part of doing business and the tax authorities often consider such gifts as bribes.

Swedes' Way of Doing Business With You

- *Quickly get down to business*

Swedes prefer to quickly start dealing with other companies based on product, price and quality rather than on their personal relationship with their contacts. Efficiency has a high value.

- *Swedes often do not use titles*

In English-speaking countries, business people often use the titles Mr, Mrs, Ms and Miss before a person's last name. Do

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not be insulted if your Swedish contacts quickly start using your first name. They are not being rude or disrespectful. This is simply because the modern Swedish language does not use that approach.

- *Clothing tend to vary with type of business*

Clothing is not a sign of respect in Sweden. In general, Swedish business people are often relatively informally dressed. However, informally clothing is not set in stone and dress codes tend to vary with sector and industry, e.g. people working in finance tend to wear more formal clothing like a suit. For special occasions and business dinners, Swedes often dress up.

- *Flat business organisation*

Do not be surprised if you meet representatives and employees from different organisational levels in a meeting with a Swedish company. The business organisation in Sweden is normally relatively flat, and business ideas are commonly discussed across all levels. It is to be expected that the person you are meeting has been delegated the decision-making power. In Sweden, it is common that a manager is considered to have a facilitating or coaching role.

Other aspects of the flat organisation structure are gender equality and age neutrality. In general, the aim is that men and women work under equal conditions.

Somewhat similar to Swedes conviction of gender equality, the ultimate goal is to be judge by one's skills and experiences rather than by the age. Therefore, it is becoming more and more common that a persons at a fairly young age has been delegated full negotiation responsibility or product responsibility.

- *Stick to the negotiated agreement*

When you negotiate with Swedish business people, they expect the negotiation to take place during the "official negotiating time". Once the negotiations are complete and an agreement has been reached, the Swede will expect you to stick to the agreement that was made. They do not like any more adjustments to the contract once it is agreed upon. This is different from some countries where agreements are constantly adjusted as time goes and things change.

- *Everything must be fair*

As mentioned, equity tends to be highly valued in Sweden. They will often look for win-win solutions and will try to find a fair solution to everything, even if the fair solution is complicated.

- *A proud impression*

Swedes are very proud of their country, their social system, their standard of living, their way of doing things, their environmental concerns and their political neutrality. Therefore, they tend to express themselves with a superior attitude. Do not be insulted if Swedes give you this impression. Remember, truly experienced business persons know that there are many ways of doing things and they are willing to learn from other people as well as other countries and cultures. Most likely your contact does not mean to give this impression.

- *Not very religious*

Although many of Sweden's national holidays are religious holidays, a lot of Swedes today are not actively religious. If certain traditions, days, holidays etc. are important for you, it can be advisable to express how you feel so that there are no misunderstandings.

- *Swedes do not like conflicts*

The Swedish culture is known for avoiding conflict. This can be good sometimes and bad sometimes. In many places negotiations and discussions can get emotional and appear to be a conflict. Many Swedes would feel uncomfortable if someone raised their voice, slammed the table, or haggled aggressively. They prefer things to be calm and to calmly reach an agreement. Haggling is not a traditional part of the Swedish culture. On the other hand, Swedes communicate directly rather than diplomatically, which can be perceived as rude and aggressive. Do not be offended by the direct and outspoken language.

- *Personal space and body contact*

Swedes have a large personal space and do not usually have much bodily contact. Shaking hands quickly is a good greeting. The Swede might feel uncomfortable with greetings that are common in other cultures such as hugging or kissing or pats on the back.

Quick Facts

Business language: Swedish, English

Summer holiday months: June-August

Other holidays: Christmas, New Year's Eve, Easter, National Day (6 June), Midsummer Eve (first Friday between 19 and 25 June)

Average monthly wage, 2009: ca. 3,000 EURO

Religion: The Church of Sweden is Evangelical Lutheran, but there are many other religions