

Workplace Culture

A guide for newcomers to British Columbia



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1. The Canadian Workplace

Introduction

As a newcomer, you may find Canadian workplace culture different from that of your home country. Practices such as shaking hands, use of personal names and methods of communicating with co-workers and supervisors vary greatly amongst cultures.

While Canadian work environments do vary depending on the employer and the type of job, there are basic business etiquette rules common to most Canadian workplaces. Learning these rules is an important step in looking for and keeping a job.

This guide explores some of the essentials of Canadian workplace culture.

2. Body Language

Non-verbal communication [also known as body language] is important when creating first impressions in the workplace. This includes job interviews and first interactions with co-workers and customers. Positive body language shows confidence and respect for others.

Some key factors in non-verbal communication include:

Personal Space

Canadians value their personal space and rarely touch each other while meeting or talking in the workplace. It is the custom to keep approximately 2 feet [or an arm's length of space] between each other when talking face to face. Standing too close can make the other person uncomfortable and standing too far away appears to indicate you are not interested.

Eye Contact

In conversation, direct eye contact shows that you are interested and paying attention. People who avoid eye contact may be considered unfriendly, untrustworthy or lacking in self-confidence. However, be careful not to stare or maintain unbroken eye contact for long periods.

Shaking Hands

A firm handshake is a common practice when first meeting an employer, new business associate or co-worker. Both men and women greet with a handshake. While shaking hands, it is also polite to make eye contact and smile.

Dress/Appearance

Every workplace has different policies regarding clothing and personal appearance. When you go for an interview or start a new job it is usually best to dress more formally or conservatively until you learn more about the individual workplace culture and its expectations. You can always alter your dress when you become more familiar with your workplace. For the most part, the common dress code for offices is informal to casual for both men and women. However, jeans, shorts or revealing clothing are generally discouraged in office environments.

Other Tips

- Be aware of your body positioning such as slouching, crossed arms and fidgeting that could give the impression of being bored or angry.
- Adjust your body language to the situation and person. Watch the other person you are speaking to for clues.
- When starting a new job it is best to be reserved and professional until you get a feel for what is “normal” in your workplace.

Find more information about body language in the workplace at:

- ***Business Body Language: Handshakes, Eye Contact, Posture and Smiles.*** The Sideroad
https://www.sideroad.com/business_etiquette/business-body-language.html
- ***The Role of Body Language in Talent Acquisition.*** LinkedIn
<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/role-body-language-talent-acquisition-bhaskar-sen-4iegc>

3. Communication Basics

Greetings

When passing people in hallways or arriving at work in the morning it is customary to say hello or good morning and make eye contact. The same applies to leaving at the end of the day. It is courteous to say hello to all co-workers regardless of their position in the company.

Personal Names/Forms of Address

Canadian workplaces are generally quite casual. It is common to address co-workers and business associates by first name, even when talking to a manager or supervisor. However, when introducing someone, use both their first and last names.

Note: There are exceptions to this in formal settings or when addressing high-ranking officials. In these cases it is common to use Mr., Ms. or Dr. and their last name.

Speaking Up and Asking Questions

Try to participate in group discussions and meetings, even if only to ask a few questions. Contributing your own ideas or thoughts indicates that you are interested and want to be involved. However, do not interrupt the conversation but wait for your turn to speak.

Most employers prefer that you ask questions if you do not understand procedures or instructions rather than be confused or make mistakes. Employers appreciate workers who are eager to learn new skills and adapt to changes in the workplace. Asking questions of colleagues and immediate supervisors is one of the best ways you can show your desire to learn and develop professionally.

“Small Talk”

Socializing and friendship are a normal part of workplace culture in Canada. Some “small talk” or conversation is expected and shows you care about your colleagues. However, it is considered impolite to ask directly about personal affairs such as religion, age and income. If a co-worker shares personal details that make you uncomfortable, you can change the subject.

Socializing for a few minutes when you arrive at work or leave for the day, or over coffee or lunch breaks is acceptable. Engaging in long conversations during office hours is not.

For more information about communication at work see:

- ***Understanding Workplace Culture: 5 Keys to Success in the Canadian Workplace. Live & Learn***
<https://livelearn.ca/article/employment/understanding-workplace-culture-5-keys-to-success-in-the-canadian-workplace/>

- ***Cross-Cultural Teamwork Episode 1: Pre-Meeting “Small Talk”.***
Toronto Regional Immigrant Employment Council
<https://vimeo.com/28676362>
This training video demonstrates good and bad examples of “small talk” and teambuilding before a workplace meeting

- ***What is Canadian Etiquette at Work?*** Ontario Settlement.Org
https://settlement.org/sys/faqs_detail.asp?faq_id=4001130

4. Fitting In and Keeping Your Job

Teamwork

In Canada teamwork is highly valued. Working well with others, listening to others' ideas and sharing responsibility are important skills. It is expected that you treat all co-workers with respect, from those working in entry-level positions to supervisors and managers.

Punctuality

It is important to arrive on time for work or business appointments. Punctuality is valued by Canadian employers, so if a meeting is set for 10 am it is common practice to arrive a few minutes early so you are ready to start right at 10. If you are going to be late be sure to phone your employers to let them know. Leaving work early is looked upon unfavourably.

Hierarchy

Most Canadian companies operate in a hierarchical (or top down) system. This means employees are expected to follow their supervisor's directions. When making decisions, asking for information, or dealing with problems, you will be expected to talk to the right person within your company based on their level of authority.

Courtesy

It is important to display respect and courtesy to everyone at all times. Make it a habit to use courtesy words such as "please", "thank you", and "you're welcome" when dealing with co-workers, managers and customers. Before entering an office, always knock as a sign of respect for other people's workspace.

Personal Attributes BC Employers are looking for:

According to a 2010 survey by the Business Council of British Columbia, most employers are looking for new job applicants with the following attributes:

- Positive attitude/motivated
- Energetic/enthusiastic
- Ability to work with little or no direction
- Honesty and integrity
- High performance
- Accountable/responsible
- Hardworking/dedicated
- Customer service oriented
- Flexible/adaptable
- Willing to work and learn
- Display leadership/management skills

Source: 2010 Biennial Skills and Attributes Survey Report [p. 7]

<https://bcbc.com/reports-and-research/2010-biennial-skills-and-attributes>

For additional information:

- **Geert Hofstede Cultural Dimensions - Canada**

<https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country/canada/>

Looks at how cultural values influence the workplace in Canada. You can compare Canada to your home country.

- **New Job? Here's How to Make a Good First Impression.** Alberta Learning Information Service

<https://alis.alberta.ca/succeed-at-work/make-your-work-life-more-satisfying/new-job-here-s-how-to-make-a-good-first-impression/>

Checklists to help you bring the most appropriate behaviours and attitudes to your new job, right from your very first day.

5. Not All Companies are the Same...

Every workplace has its own culture. Some standards and expectations may be written in policy manuals. However, some values and ways of communicating are unwritten.

Often the easiest way to figure out a particular workplace culture is to observe others and to ask.

Written Rules

Written rules are policies and procedures documented on paper by a company or organization. These rules help everyone understand their work responsibilities and may be found in documents such as a company's policy manual or Code of Conduct. In general, written rules include items such as hours of work, sick leave, vacation and employee benefits.

Unwritten Rules

Some "unwritten rules" items that may vary company to company include:

Email and Phone Use

In general work email and phone lines are intended for work purposes. In most companies it is best to avoid using them for personal reasons, except for emergencies.

It is also recommended that you turn off your cell phone or put it on silent when at work and avoid answering it unless on a break.

Personal Business

Find out how you are expected to deal with personal and family business such as caring for sick children or parents, medical appointments, making personal phone calls, etc. [Sometimes these issues are included in a company's written rules].

Breaks

Breaks are required by law. However, in some companies breaks are formal, requiring you to take a coffee or lunch break at a specific time. In other companies you can take your break whenever you want it. It is best to start by observing your co-workers.

Perfume

Many workplaces no longer want employees to use perfume or cologne because others may have allergies.

6. Legal Aspects

Sometimes you might question if a workplace culture is appropriate or if your employers are taking advantage of you. The resources below provide information about your rights as a Canadian worker:

Employment Standards Act

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/employment-business/employment-standards-advice/employment-standards>

The Employment Standards Act and Regulation sets minimum standards that employers must follow in the treatment of their employees. The Employment Standards Act covers issues like minimum wages, mandatory payment of overtime, sick days and termination of employment.

WorkSafe BC

<https://www.worksafebc.com/>

WorkSafeBC is dedicated to promoting workplace health and safety for the workers and employers of this province.

Canadian Human Rights Commission

<https://www.chrc-ccdp.gc.ca/en>

The Canadian Human Rights Commission works to increase respect for human rights in the workplace by encouraging employers to ensure the principles of equality and human dignity are practiced in the workplace.

7. Additional Resources

Still looking for more information? Try looking at the following resources:

- ***You're Hired...Now What? An Immigrant's Guide to Success in the Canadian Workplace*** / Lynda Goldman. 2010. Central Library, 650.13 G61y
- ***No Canadian Experience, Eh? A Career Success Guide for New Immigrants*** / Daisy Wright. Central Library, 650.142 W94n1
- ***Orientation, Retention and Promotion: A Guide for Building Welcoming and Inclusive Workplaces for New Immigrant Workers.***
Developed by DIVERSEcity Community Resources Society and PEERs Employment and Education Resources. 2018
https://getintheknow.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/GetInTheKnow-Orientation_Retention_Promotion-Guidebook-2018.pdf
- ***Canadian Immigrant Magazine***
<https://canadianimmigrant.ca>
Search website using keywords "etiquette" or "workplace culture" to retrieve a selection of articles discussing dos and don'ts in the Canadian workplace.
- ***Business Etiquette Quiz. Centennial College***
<https://www.centennialcollege.ca/pdf/gradsuccesspack/JobOffer/busetquiz.pdf>

Courses in Workplace Culture

- ***SUCCESS BC. Canadian Workplace Skills Workshops***
<https://successbc.ca/>
SUCCESS offers settlement services to newcomers, including workshops on workplace culture. Contact SUCCESS for information on upcoming workshops.
- ***Workplace Connections Mentoring Program. MOSAIC BC***
<https://www.mosaicbc.org/services/employment/workplace-connections-mentoring/>
- ***ISSofBC: Learn English***
<https://issbc.org/program-types/learn-english/>
Learn job search skills, workplace English and Canadian workplace culture to help you reach your employment potential.

Questions? Please ask the Information Staff, Central Library or telephone 604-331-3603.

Please note that the information in this guide is also available online through the Skilled Immigrant InfoCentre website at <https://www.vpl.ca/siic>.