

# Workplace Culture

A guide for newcomers to British Columbia



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Canada

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## 1. The Canadian Workplace

### *Introduction*

Many newcomers find Canadian workplaces very different from those of their home countries. Practices such as shaking hands, use of personal names and methods of communicating with co-workers and supervisors vary greatly amongst cultures.

While Canadian workplace cultures 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 takes you through some of the fundamentals of Canadian workplace culture.

## **2. Body Language**

Non-verbal communication is important when creating first impressions in the workplace, including job interviews and initial interactions with co-workers and customers. Positive body language conveys an employee's 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 customary to maintain approximately 2 feet [or an arm's length of space] between each other when talking face to face. Standing too close can seem invasive and standing too far away appears to indicate you are not interested in the other person

### ***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. In general, when you go for an interview or start a new job it is 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, although 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.
- Generally speaking, 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 – Practical Advice Straight from the Experts  
[http://www.sideroad.com/Business\\_Etiquette/business-body-language.html](http://www.sideroad.com/Business_Etiquette/business-body-language.html)
- ***Body Language Influences Hiring Decisions.*** Baseline Magazine  
<http://www.baselinemag.com/c/a/Business-Intelligence/Body-Language-Influences-Hiring-Decisions-277906/>  
Results of Career Builder Survey of hiring managers

### 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 contribute. 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 a new employee can show his or her 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 demonstrates 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 with you personal details that make you uncomfortable, 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.

More information about communication styles and workplace culture in Canada available at:

- ***Cultural Information – Canada. Centre for Intercultural Learning. Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada.***  
<http://www.intercultures.ca/cil-cai/ci-ic-eng.asp?iso=ca#cn-1>
- ***Cross-Cultural Teamwork Episode 1: Pre-Meeting “Small Talk”.***  
**Toronto Regional Immigrant Employment Council**  
<http://www.hireimmigrants.ca/resources-tools/videos/small-talk/>  
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  
[http://settlement.org/sys/faqs\\_detail.asp?faq\\_id=4001130](http://settlement.org/sys/faqs_detail.asp?faq_id=4001130)
- ***Doing Business in Canada. Canadian Social and Business Culture.***  
Communicaid Global Communication  
<http://www.communicaid.com/pdf/Doing%20business%20in%20Canada.pdf>
- ***Communication in Canada.*** Accesemployment.ca  
[http://www.accesemployment.ca/files/job\\_seeker/Communcation\\_in\\_Canada%20Quiz.pdf](http://www.accesemployment.ca/files/job_seeker/Communcation_in_Canada%20Quiz.pdf)  
Take this quiz to find out how well you may or may not be communicating in the Canadian workplace

## 4. Fitting In and Keeping Your Job

### ***Teamwork***

In Canada the concept of 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***

Although employees often work independently or in teams on day-to-day tasks, most Canadian companies operate in a hierarchical (or top down) system, and 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 key attributes:

- Positive attitude/motivation
- Energetic/enthusiastic
- Ability to work with little or no direction/self-motivation
- Honesty/integrity
- High performance
- Accountable/responsible
- Hardworking/dedicated
- Customer service oriented
- Flexible/adaptable
- Willingness to work and learn
- Leadership/management skills

Source: 2010 Biennial Skills and Attributes Survey Report [p. 7]  
[http://www.bcbc.com/Documents/REF\\_SS\\_2010\\_CompleteReport.pdf](http://www.bcbc.com/Documents/REF_SS_2010_CompleteReport.pdf)

For additional information you may be interested in looking at the following resources:

- ***Geert Hofstede Cultural Dimensions - Canada***  
<http://geert-hofstede.com/canada.html>  
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  
<http://alis.alberta.ca/ep/eps/tips/tips.html?EK=3340>  
Checklists to help you bring the most appropriate behaviours and attitudes to work with you, 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, certain 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 expectations and may be found in documents such as a company's policy manual or Code of Conduct. Generally, 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 line 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 to 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 new Canadians are not sure if workplace culture is appropriate or if their employers are taking advantage of them. The resources below provide information about your rights as a Canadian worker:

### ***Employment Standards Act***

<http://www.labour.gov.bc.ca/esb/>

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***

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

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

### ***Canadian Human Rights Commission***

<http://www.chrc-ccdp.ca/default-eng.aspx>

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, Level 4, Science & Business. 650.13 G61y
- ***How to Find a Job in Canada: Common Problems and Effective Solutions*** / Efim Cheinis and Dale Sproule. 2008. Central Library, Level 4, Science & Business. 650.142 C51h
- ***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. 2011  
<http://www.getintheknow.ca/files/resources/orientation-retention-promotion-guidebook.pdf>  
Pages 20-24 provide tips and strategies for new employees
- **Canadian Immigrant Magazine**  
<http://canadianimmigrant.ca>  
Search website using keywords "etiquette" or "workplace culture." A selection of articles discussing dos and don'ts in the Canadian workplace are retrieved.
- ***Skills Connect for Immigrants Program. Workplace Culture***  
<http://www.skillsconnect.ca/seeking-employment/workplace-culture>
- ***Business Etiquette in Canada. Tips for Conducting Business in the Canadian Workplace.*** Cultural Coalition of Chatham-Kent.  
<http://www.ccck.ca/files/Business%20Etiquette%20Reformat.pdf>
- ***Canadian Workplace Culture. Royal Roads University***  
<http://student.myrru.royalroads.ca/student-services/canadian-workplace-culture>  
Check out the links under "Resources and Tools"
- ***Business Etiquette Quiz. Centennial College***  
<http://www.centennialcollege.ca/pdf/gradsuccesspack/JobOffer/busetquiz.pdf>

## Courses

- **SUCCESS BC. Canadian Workplace Culture Workshops**  
[http://www.successbc.ca/eng/component/option,com\\_mtree/task,listcats/cat\\_id,65/Itemid,26/limit,10/limitstart,10/](http://www.successbc.ca/eng/component/option,com_mtree/task,listcats/cat_id,65/Itemid,26/limit,10/limitstart,10/)  
SUCCESS offers settlement and integration services to immigrants and their families, including workshops on workplace culture. Contact SUCCESS for information on upcoming workshops.
- **ISS of BC. ELSA for the Workplace Courses**  
<http://www.issbc.org/elsa>
- **ISS of BC. Career Axis**  
<http://www.issbc.org/careeraxis>  
This program includes workshops on Canadian Workplace Culture
- **Orientation to Canadian Workplace Culture. Douglas College**  
<http://www.douglas.bc.ca/training-community-education/ocwc.html>

**Questions? Please ask the Information Staff in the Science and Business Division on Level 4, Central Library or telephone 604-331-3624.**