



France

cultural note

France has a civil-law system, rather than the common-law system of the United States. Commercial agreements are short because they refer to the legal code. Many business people have studied law and can draw up their own contracts. Parties to an international contract may choose which country's laws will govern it.

Country Background

History

The cultural roots of the French go back to the Celtic Gauls, who were conquered by Julius Caesar in 51 B.C. Five hundred years later, Clovis extended Frankish rule over much of Europe; and after Charlemagne's death in 814, France became one of the successor kingdoms. France developed into the strongest of the unified Continental monarchies (as opposed to Germany and Italy, which were unified later).

The French Revolution (1789-1793) overthrew the monarchy, and established the First Republic. Napoleon ruled over the First Empire (1804-1815), and successive governments led to the existing Fifth Republic (1958 to present).

Type of Government

France is a multiparty republic. The head of the government is the prime minister; the president is chief of state. The French people elect the president and the two houses of parliament. The president, who appoints the prime minister (but subject to the election results), serves for seven years. The president has a large share of the power, including the right to dissolve the lower house of parliament, the Assemblée Nationale, and call for new elections. According to the constitution, it is the government and not the president that decides on national policy.

Language

French is the official language. The French people are very proud of their language, which was the international language of diplomacy for centuries. If you do not speak French, it is advisable to apologize for this. However, many French business people speak English.

Religion

There is no official religion. France is principally a Catholic country (90 percent), although new immigrants represent other religions, such as Islam.

Demographics

The population of France is 56 million. Urbanization occurred after World War II, and now cities are home to 75 percent of the people. Paris has 8.7 million; the other important centers (Lyon, Marseille, and Lille) have under 1.5 million. Growing areas are Lyon, Grenoble (in the Alps), and the southern coast (Toulouse, Montpellier, Nice).

Cultural Orientation

Cognitive Styles: How the French Organize and Process Information

The French will readily accept information for the purpose of debate and may change their minds quickly, but strong ethnocentrism will not allow the acceptance of anything contrary to the cultural norm. Ideas are very important to them, and they approach knowledge from an analytical and critical perspective. They look at each situation as a unique problem and bring all their knowledge to bear on it.

Negotiation Strategies: What the French Accept as Evidence

Arguments tend to be made from an analytical, critical perspective with eloquent rhetorical "it and logic. There is a great love for debate, striving for effect rather than detail and image over facts. Feelings and faith in some ideology may become part of the rhetoric.

Value Systems: The Basis for Behavior

Pride in their heritage sometimes makes them appear egotistical in their behavior. The following three sections identify the Value Systems in the predominant culture—their methods of dividing right from wrong, good from evil, and so forth.

Locus of Decision Making

The French are strongly individualistic and have a centralized authority structure that makes quick decisions possible. The relationship between the participants becomes a major variable in the decision-making process. One's self-identity is based on his or her accomplishments in the social realm. Education is the primary variable in social standing. Individual privacy is necessary in all walks of life.

Sources of Anxiety Reduction

The French seem to be preoccupied with status, rank, and formality. Contacts are of utmost importance. Their attachment to a public figure gives them a sense of security. Yet, individuality is preferable to conformity. They are reluctant to take risks, so little long-range planning is done, as the future is uncertain. One is allowed to show both positive and negative emotions in public.

Issues of Equality/Inequality

There is a highly stratified class system, but most people are middle-class. However, there is much hostility between social groups. Superiors demand obedience from subordinates in all walks of life. Power is a basic fact of society, and leaders with the

ability to unify the country or group are highly prized. Sex roles in society are fluid, and one's status is more important than one's sex.

Business Practices

Appointments



punctuality

- Always make appointments for both business and social occasions. Be as punctual as you would be in the United States, although in the south, the French are more relaxed about time.
- Most French get four or five weeks of summer vacation, and take it in July and August. Indeed, except for the tourist industry, France virtually shuts down in August. Try to conduct business during other months.
- Always present your business card. When receiving the cards of others, treat them very carefully.
- It is best to have your business card printed in French upon arrival. One side can be in English, with the translation in French on the other side. On the French side, include any academic credentials, and your school if it is a prestigious one.
- Business hours are from 8:30 or 9:00 A.M. to 6:30 or 7:00 P.m. Lunch may last for two hours or more. In Paris, lunch begins at 1:00 P.m.; in the provinces, at noon or 12:30 P.m. Executives often stay in the office until 7:00 or 8:00 P.m.
- The best times to schedule meetings are around 11:00 A.M. or 3:30 P.m.



Negotiating

cultural note

most English-speaking French have studied British-style English, which can lead to communication breakdowns with speakers of American-style English. For example, in the United States, a presentation that "bombs" has failed, but in England it has succeeded.

Words in French and English may have the same roots, but different meanings or connotations. If you don't speak French, don't be offended too easily. For example, a French person might "demand" something, because demander simply means "to ask." If you speak some French, don't assume that an English word will have the same connotation in French. For example, if you ask for the bathroom and use the translation *solle de bains*, it will not be understood that you are asking for /a toilette.

- Eye contact among the French is frequent and intense-so much so that North Americans may be intimidated.
- Because of the strong "old-boy network" and lack of merit-based promotions, employees stick to their job descriptions. Know who does what. If you are in charge of a service-oriented company, make it a policy to promote your French nationals based on good service, because your French management may not do so. Be sure to effectively communicate your company's standards for service.

- The French are known for their formal and reserved nature. A casual attitude during business transactions will alienate them.
- During negotiations, the French may make you seem to be the demandeur (petitioner), thus putting you in the weaker position.
- Hierarchies are strict. Junior executives will give a problem to a superior. Try to cultivate high-level personal contacts. The top executive is known as the PDG (pronounced pay-day-ahjay), or *president-directeur-general*.
- Women should not mistake French gallantry for condescension.
- Don't start a conversation by asking personal questions.
- Don't mistake a high-pitched voice and excited gestures for anger; they usually just mean great interest in the subject.
- The French are very formal in their letter-writing style.



Business Entertaining

- Business can be conducted during any meal, but lunch is best.
- Though the French are familiar with "le power breakfast," they are not enthusiastic about it.
- Lunch can last two hours. Dinner is late (8:00 or 9:00 P.m.).
- At a business lunch or dinner, show enthusiasm about the food before beginning a business discussion.
- The business drink should not be held in a cafe; they are too noisy. Try a quiet hotel bar.
- Whoever initiates the meal or drink is expected to pay. Reservations are necessary in most restaurants, except in brasseries and in hotels. In choosing a restaurant, stick to French rather than ethnic ones.
- The French have a great appreciation for good conversationalists.
- When eating, keep both hands on the table at all times. Food comes gradually, so don't fill up too soon. When finished, place your fork and knife parallel across your plate. Cheese is served at the end of the meal; do not put it directly on your bread, and do not serve yourself twice.
- Don't drink hard liquor before meals or smoke between courses. The French believe this deadens the taste buds.
- Wine is customary with meals. If you do not want any, turn your glass upside down before the meal.
- Respect privacy. The French close doors behind them; you should do the same. Knock and wait before entering.

Time

- France is one hour ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (G.M.T. + 1). This makes it six hours ahead of U.S. Eastern Standard Time (E.S.T. + 6).

Protocol



Greetings

- Always shake hands when being introduced or when meeting someone, as well as when leaving. In general, the woman offers her hand first. French handshakes are not as firm as in the United States.
- In social settings, with friends, expect to do *les bises*, or touching cheeks and kissing the air.



Titles / Forms of Address

- Find out the titles of older French people you meet, and address them in that way both during the introduction and in the course of conversation. Even simple titles like Madame should be used as you converse, whether in English or French.
- Use Madame for all women except young girls.
- Don't use first names until you are told to do so. Don't be put off by the use of last names; it doesn't mean that the French are unfriendly. If you speak French, use the *vous* form until you are told to use *tu*.
- The French sometimes say their last names first, so that Pierre Robert might introduce himself as "Robert, Pierre." Ask!



Gestures

- The "thumbs up" sign means "O.K."; the U.S. "O.K." sign (forming a circle with thumb and forefinger) means "zero" in France.
- Slapping the open palm over a closed fist is vulgar.
- To call for the check, make a writing gesture.
- Don't chew gum in public!
- Men should stand up or make a move to stand up when a visitor or a superior enters the room.



Gifts

- Don't give a business gift at your first encounter.
- Avoid the too-lavish and the too-skimpy. Avoid gifts with your company logo. Good taste is everything.
- Don't include your business card with a gift.
- Good gifts include books or music, as they show interest in the intellect. Bring American best-sellers, especially biographies. The thicker and more complex the book, the better; simplicity is not a virtue in France.
- Bring flowers (not roses or chrysanthemums) or fine chocolates or liqueur to the host, and present them before, not after, the party. Do not bring wine, as it has probably already been carefully selected for the occasion by the host.

- For thank-you's, send (at least) a note the next day, and flowers or a basket of fruit if you wish. Since not all orders can be paid for with a credit card over the phone, ask the hotel if it is possible to add the payment to your hotel bill.



Dress

- The French are very aware of dress. Be conservative and invest in well-made clothes.
- In the north and in the winter, men should wear dark suits.
- North American men should be aware that French suits are cut differently. Let your colleagues make the first move toward a more relaxed look.