

Singapore's Corporate Culture

Singapore's cosmopolitan mix means that there are many cultural influences at work. Here's how to deal with the local culture and avoid awkward faux pas. by LISA-ANN LEE



For many Western expatriates working here, doing business in cosmopolitan Singapore is a breeze. The fact that English is widely spoken means that people from English-speaking countries have one less barrier to overcome. Add to this the incentives and schemes set in place by the government to attract foreign businesses and investors to Singapore and it is no wonder why expats such as Michael Rose, CEO of public relations agency MRA Communications, choose to settle down in the country. "There's nothing difficult about doing business in Singapore," says the Australian, who has been living here for the past eight years.

However, as easy as it is doing business here, Singapore is not without its own cultural nuances, and how successful you are depends on how well you understand them.

WHAT IT REALLY MEANS According to business consultant Gary Lim, despite the ease of communicating in English, one of the stumbling blocks facing foreign investors and professionals lies, in the way they communicate. Singaporeans, especially those from an older generation, tend to favor an indirect approach when discussing

matters that might have negative consequences. For instance, instead of telling their Western counterparts that they are unable to do something, they might give a vague response such as "I'll try" or "Maybe" in order to maintain a sense of cordiality. The latter will then assume that they can deliver on their promise and are often frustrated when they find that this isn't the case. Lim says that in order to prevent such things from happening, foreigners should learn how to decipher "non verbal signals" and ask the right kind of questions in order avoid any misunderstandings.

For newcomers to the country, Margit Kunz, Deputy General Manager of the Singapore-German Chamber of Industry and Commerce suggests that it always helps to listen and ask questions. "If you're new and you're not so used to the environment, you can ask in a very polite way if this means no and explain that it's not to put any stress on the person but to calculate the [timeline of the] project properly."

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS The high level of transparency in Singapore's laws has made it the least corrupt country in Asia. For foreign investors, this means that the success of their business isn't dependent entirely on who they know. However, this doesn't mean that you should just play according to the rules, so to speak. While foreigners aren't expected to ply their Singaporean counterparts with gifts, they should make the effort to get to know them better. Annie Yap, CEO of local recruitment company, The GMP Group, says that "building and maintaining relationships are important [among] the business milieu in Singapore [and that] relationships are valued more than the companies that expatriates represent." So make the effort to grow your relationship with your business counterparts by accepting their invitations to go out for meals "as these occasions are frequently where business deals are drafted and sealed."

OBSERVE THE PECKING ORDER These occasions often have a relaxed atmosphere, yet this doesn't mean that you should let your hair down completely. Like many of their other Asian counterparts, Singaporeans tend to be very mindful of the status quo. Thus even though they may not agree with their bosses' views, they are unlikely to challenge them. This is slowly starting to change, observes Angela Dove, a British expat who runs her own copywriting firm. "What's emerging is the idea that staff should play a part [in an organization], that their ideas are valued." However, she also adds that this may take some time to fully come into effect as the employees themselves are not used to such a culture. Expats who are more accustomed to speaking and hearing their colleagues speak their mind, may find this trait frustrating.

Roberto Fabbri, an Italian businessman who helps European companies set up a presence in Singapore, observes that while the country has a "more active" business culture compared to the Old World economies, it can afford to be more spontaneous.

"[Singaporeans] mind very much what other people think... In general, there are a lot of people who fear making mistakes but there's no real learning without [failure]."





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HUMILITY IS PRIZED Kathleen Curran-Meier, founder and principal consultant of Intercultural Systems, a cross-cultural training consultancy based in Singapore and the United States, observes that in a country that values humility, American managers who are used to being candid about their own achievements may often be perceived as arrogant and boastful. Her advice? Instead of talking about your past experience and what you have achieved in your own country, “take the time to earn credibility” by listening and getting to know your local staff.

Linda Fulford, Managing Director of Fulford PR, agrees. Drawing from her own experience of setting up an agency in Singapore, she recommends “that [expats] work closely with Singaporeans rather than assume [they] know it all as an expat— while [they] may have the international experience to bring to the table, [they] have to know the local culture, nuances and contacts.” In other words, treat local staff as “your greatest asset.”

NEGOTIATE One of the things that expats might be unaccustomed to when dealing with official establishments is the amount of bargaining that they have to do before a contract is signed. A source in the creative industry, who declined to be named, says that compared to government agencies in the West, where haggling over prices is unheard of, in Singapore, “you’re expected to give a high price [after which they’ll] bargain it down. Also, they’ll squeeze you for all you’re worth so you have to be upfront about what you’ll do for them.”

EASIEST PLACE TO DO BUSINESS Yet, despite all these potential cultural differences, Singapore is consistently ranked the world’s easiest place to do business. Indeed, the number of multi-national companies coming to set up headquarters in the country has been rising steadily and according to results released by the Department of Statistics last year, the number of foreigners in Singapore rose by nearly 15 percent to 1,005,500 between 2006 and 2007. For Asian and Western expatriates alike, Singapore’s high standard of living, low crime rate and solid economic infrastructure far

outweigh any challenges they might experience here. Also, the ease of integrating into the community is another attraction. Says Kunz, “Many people feel at home here even though they may not be citizens or PRs because they can blend in...it’s a very inclusive environment.” Dr Claus Trenner, a partner at Luther Law Firm, adds, “If you want to open a business here, you feel immediately welcome. It’s not a question of whether you have enough money or not. You don’t have to prove first that you’re worthy of doing business here.”

Even the rising costs of living here do not seem to deter most expats. In a 2007 survey conducted by Mercer Human Resource Consulting, Singapore was ranked the 14th most expensive city in the world. New York was 15th. Yet, for Asian expats like Filipino investment banker, Jeff Choa, the quality of life and standard of education outweigh the economic costs. The father of two explains, “From a Filipino point of view, I think it’s very easy to acclimatize in Singapore. The people here speak English; they’re multicultural...and people speak very well of the environment for kids. Housing is a little on the high side but then compared to Hong Kong it’s still reasonable. It came down to considering the whole experience that we’d get out of [living in] Singapore so despite the increase in [the cost of] housing, domestic help and cars, we still felt it was a step in the right direction financially, for the kids and for our careers.”



“Here, there’s a very polite way of handing over your name card with both hands and paying real attention to them...people who are not exposed to Asian culture might be thought of as unfriendly when they hand over their name cards casually but that’s not necessarily the case. It’s just the way people do things in another culture!”

—Margit Kunz, Deputy General Manager, Singapore-German Chamber of Industry and Commerce

NEW DEVELOPMENTS

In a bid to position Singapore as a premium destination to work, live and play in, the government has gone to huge efforts to develop premium locations on the island in the hope of attracting global investors, expatriates and visitors. Some of the newest developments can be found in the Marina Bay area, and they include:

The Singapore Flyer

Opened in March this year, the Singapore Flyer is one of the newest waterfront attractions in Singapore. Standing at 165 meters, the Singapore Flyer is a giant observation wheel that was developed at the cost of S\$240 million. It offers 30-minute rides in air-conditioned and UV light-protected capsules, and allows visitors to enjoy dramatic views of the Singapore landscape.

Marina Bay Sands

The Marina Bay Sands is slated for completion in 2009, and will be one of the first casinos in Singapore. It was built with the objective of enhancing Singapore's reputation as a must-visit destination for leisure and business visitors. When completed, Marina Bay Sands will be similar to major resorts in the Bahamas and Las Vegas, and will offer visitors a range of amenities from hotels, convention facilities and entertainment shows to themed attractions, luxury retail, fine dining and casino gaming.

Marina Bay Financial Center

One of the key areas to look out for is the two billion dollar Marina Bay Financial Center, which is expected to open in 2010. Set to be the Canary Wharf of Singapore, it was conceived and designed by Gene Kohn of New York-based architectural firm Kohn Pederson Fox Associates (the guys responsible for the Shanghai World Financial Center and The World Bank headquarters) and is envisioned as a "city in a garden" complete with sky gardens, landscaped public spaces and dramatic crystalline office towers and residential homes surrounded by stunning bay, city and seascape vistas.

Marina at Keppel Bay

Marina at Keppel Bay is set to become one of the most exclusive and sought after residential addresses. Located within close proximity to the CBD, recreational island Sentosa and Maritime Port Authority, it is the only residential area in Singapore to boast a marina on its own private island. Facilities include berths for 170 yachts,




including an individual pontoon berthing system for mega-yachts of up to 250 feet, a unifloat concrete pontoon system built by Bellingham Marine, fixed breakwater protecting larger berths, a reticulated vacuum sewer pump-out system, and the latest security technologies designed by Oneberry Technologies. Long term business visitors to Singapore who are planning to stay at least six months can rent one of the 168 corporate units at the award-winning Caribbean at Keppel Bay, which is situated by the water. For more information, visit www.caribbean.com.sg. 



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