

BUSINESS WITH THE BRITISH - ALWAYS LOOK ON THE BRIGHT SIDE?

*Insights, society backgrounds and practical information
on how to present and act in negotiations with British
business prospects*

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The British. What comes to mind if you hear those words? Well, the referendum and its related press and mess of course and the recent general election. But these are just recent events. What else? The Queen, tea, terrorists, men in skirts or the famous art of queuing, probably?

The UK is now the third foreign country where I have lived and worked. Having been here for almost five years, it seems that every day it gets more and more difficult for me to understand what the British are and why. I am also finding it increasingly difficult to adapt to the subtleties the British ways of life presents, and I have still my so called “Monty Python moments”, when things look and feel a bit surreal. I should probably be more accurate here and say that in particular, I am talking about the culture of the English, the largest country in Britain, rather than the British as a whole, as there is not really a single British culture. Britain, or more accurately the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, is made up of four countries, each with their own very distinct culture. Although the four parts of this “United Kingdom” squabble all the time, it is nonetheless united and I will explain later what I mean by that and to avoid making this article overly complicated I will stick

to using “British” or as they are often known, the “Brits” as a description and hope that my readers from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will forgive my overly simple view.

But back to the Brits. While this might sound strange, what you see with them is not what you get, unlike the Germans for example, although they also have different ways in different areas of the country. There are more subtleties of culture and language in Britain than there are layers in an onion and to get an insight of what makes this island and its inhabitants tick is often difficult. The British, as the extract from the Economist referenced at the next page shows, may not say what they mean or mean what they say. But if you want to be successful in doing business with the British (and remember it is the largest outsourcing market in Europe), then it is worth spending a little time in trying to understand them.

In the last few years, I have been working in a global environment – although there are many countries with which I had little or no involvement. But I discovered that the layers of meaning within the British culture seemed to give them an advantage when pursuing global business. Let me give you an exam-

ple, when things were looking as if they were really getting out of hand – be it for business reasons or cultural reasons – there was one person, everybody always turned to. Richard Avery, my co-author was one of only a handful people who seemed to understand the complexities involved in conducting business whether outsourcing or M&A across 130 countries working to aggressive deadlines – and Richard is British. Before you start with the “keep calm and ...” stereotypes, what made him successful other than his vast experience was a mind-set that was used to dealing with ambiguity and that thrived on the complexities of managing hundreds of cultures and attitudes.

CUP OF TEA AND A BISCUIT ANY-ONE?

The deputy headmaster of one of my local schools in the UK, who is very much in love with Germany, recently asked me about the main differences I had found between the two countries. One of the first things which came into my mind is history and related to this, tradition. The British are very much defined by their history. They perceive this as a very long continuum, whereas in Germany there is a tremendous

BRITISH ENGLISH “TRANSLATIONS”

I hear what you say

I disagree and do not want to discuss it further

With the greatest respect...

I think that you are an idiot

That's a very brave proposal

You are insane

I would suggest ...

Do it or be prepared to justify yourself

Quite good

A bit disappointing

“Translations” based on an article at The Economist, 07.05.2011

and very painful black hole. A break which is hard to deal with in terms of identity or “being proud” of anything German, although I have found one source which names Britain as the most belligerent country on earth and it certainly has some “skeletons in its closet”. History however, is one of the pillars of the British cultural identity. A very moving moment is “Armed Forces Day”, which is celebrated every year with the keen participation of the population. In one of the speeches I heard, the speaker mentions WWII and although there are still painful memories, they spoke with great respect for their former enemy. On the other hand, British humour knows few limits.

While it can be very gentle (one comedy programme about three old men doing nothing much, ran for over 20 years), British humour’s attitude towards foreigners and the war can be very harsh indeed. As an example, I would recommend John Cleese in *Faulty Towers* talking or rather not talking about “the war”: “It’s all forgotten now, and let’s hear no more about it. So, that’s two, egg mayonnaise, a prawn Goebbels, a Hermann Goering, and four Colditz salads.” However, when I say that British humour knows few limits, I have to admit that the limit does not ex-

tend so far as “Dinner For One” which despite being British, is largely unknown in the UK and a complete mystery to most Brits I have met.

And, here is the conundrum. While many British TV programmes and the right-wing element of their press can be extremely xenophobic and, let’s be honest, downright offensive, most Brits take people at face value and are polite and respectful of the people they meet, regardless of where they come from.

Another peculiarity of the British culture is the so called “community spirit”. To a certain and limited extent, it was present in the corporate environment where any animosity or personal ambition was very much secondary to the common goal. I have never experienced this attitude to such a degree in any other country / society where I have worked or lived.

So, what do I mean by “community spirit” and how does it present itself? It seems that most cities, towns, villages have a long tradition of “us against them” – be it districts, streets or neighbouring villages. There is often some kind of traditional, but normally light-hearted, feud the origins of which have often been

forgotten many generations since. But somehow it is expected of everyone to keep it going; it is like an unwritten rule or glue that holds people together. On the other hand, everybody is aware that this attitude is not really sustainable and therefore it is very limited. As an example: I live in a small neighbourhood where everyone puts their waste-bin outside the evening before the refuse collector arrives. Once the bins are emptied the person who sees this first brings back all the waste-bins, not just theirs but everyone’s. You do not even have to be “friends” with the other person.

The same applies to charitable activities – there are hundreds maybe even thousands of charities where you can become involved (in 2015 it was reported that people in UK donated more to charity in GDP terms than any other country in Europe and the UK Government donates more in International aid than any country other than the US). The British seem to have an underlying mind-set, that you give if you can, because there might be a day when you and your family need help. The British not-for-profit business has dimensions of an industrial sector (“third sector”).



It is also based on a long tradition and helping people in need is still taught in schools as a British Value.

Another aspect which I must mention, is the proverbial British politeness. English is superficially quite an easy language to learn. You can very quickly express yourself and make yourself understood, even with completely incorrect grammar and an accent. I think it is related to the influence of various other languages and cultures: the Vikings (brought a Nordic aspect), German (from the Saxons), Latin (thanks to the church) along

with Hindi, French, Spanish and just about any other language you can think of.

English is a lovely mixture and every time I replaced a missing word in my Germanic vocabulary with a Latin expression, it worked – although I found that this way of speaking was regarded as “intellectual”. The problem is that English becomes a more and more complicated language the more you delve into it.

You will never hear anything quite straightforward and there are endless hidden lines between the lines. Some call this tact or diplomacy, while others would say that the British are

liars because they never really say what they mean. In any case, you can be sent to hell in such a way that you will be looking forward to the journey – and not even recognise what has just happened. It all depends on your own culture and how communication works there. If you come from a straight speaking culture, such as Germany or the Netherlands, it can be very tiring and perceived as a waste of time to participate in this continuous dancing around the subject. However, when the non-native speaker tries to dig deeper to understand something it can cause massive tensions. The Brits all talk and write between the lines, in a way which a non-native isn't capable of comprehending ever. Not only that, but the continuous use of indirect speech,

sarcasm and irony can also be difficult to comprehend, even for native English speakers from other countries such as the USA. The non-native speaker regards the Brit as evasive while the Brit regards the non-native as direct to the point of rudeness. As an example, Richard told me about a situation where a German assistant kept telling him how to do his job. One day he finally overcame his inbuilt politeness and told the assistant that he was the boss not her. She in turn got very upset, because she was not attempting to tell him how to do his job, but simply seeking advice on how problems should be solved.

However, she did not want to appear as though she was not capable and suggested ways that the problem might be solved, which her boss misunderstood as her telling him how to do his job.

Once this communication misunderstanding was resolved they worked well together. I personally remember having experienced such a scenario in my early days in the UK.

I didn't understand what was going on or how to find out what was going on, so kept asking questions. However, I in my defence always tried to explain why I was asking. My persistent questioning, even with explanations was not well received and even to this day the subject of my questioning is still not talking to me and when we meet he acts as if I do not exist.

Leading on from this, you can normally recognize a Brit who has been living abroad and working with non-native speakers quite easily: they often talk slower, they practise a less sophisticated and colourful way of expressing what they mean and they forgive any perceived "rudeness".

There is a lesson to be learned from this: before you feel offended and get aggressive with that devious Brit, ask yourself if they really mean to communicate that way?

Offensive, outright rude? Even if they are – and sometimes there is a potentially nasty twist within the lines – you don't have to take it this way. Stay calm and polite. It gets you further and disarms the other party.

AND IF IT ALL GOES WRONG?

Having the proverbial cup of tea and a biscuit, might be a stereotype, and you might have a coffee instead, but the advantage of tea is that it takes time to make. It gives you a timeout and allows your mind to reflect on the topic which is agitating you. As you focus on the ceremony (prepare the water, warm the teapot, wait for the brew... you get the idea of time spent?), you calm down and collect yourself.

There is another famous anecdote, not involving tea, but showing how British seem to remain calm and unemotional in the face of adversity: on being warned that the Spanish fleet (armada) was approaching, Sir Francis Drake is said to have remarked that there was still enough time to finish his game of bowls (which like cricket is a sport which cannot be understood by outsiders) and still beat the Spaniards. I certainly wonder if this is the true reason behind the British termination of their EU membership?

KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON

When attempting to do business with the Brits, there are several things that you should keep in mind. First and most obviously, is that what we are talking about is a preference for working in a particular way. Not everyone will think or act the same. Secondly, the British tend to focus on past glories and not future opportunities, so discussions about future business will often be framed in the context of the past.

For example, a single world cup win in 1966 is given more credence than Germany's four overall and three since 1966, wins. Finally, Brits are ideas people. They claim that more inventions come from the UK than any other country. Whether this is true or not, the theory of evolution, the world-wide web, the telephone and chocolate bars, to name but a few, are all British inventions, although it seems that the British are not very good at bringing their inventions to market.

So, what does this mean to you, a foreigner trying to do business in the UK? First of all, do not be surprised if the person you are dealing with does not conform to your expected stereotype. They may not be English at all, they may be Scots (not Scotch – that is a drink), Welsh, Irish or one of the other 100 plus nationalities that populate the large cities of the UK.

Secondly, the discussion may well be framed in the context of “we do things differently and it has always worked well for us”. Do not take this as a rejection, but as a challenge to convince them why your way is better. And when I say convince, I do not mean tell the Brit that they are wrong or drown them in technical details, you need to let them gradually come to the conclusion that while they are correct, you might, just might, have an idea worth considering.

You may find that this acceptance of your ideas comes between meetings or during breaks in meetings, so be prepared for timeouts or extended gaps between meeting, while they think your ideas through.

Expect to have your perfect proposal and solution changed in some way. There will always be ideas presented as to how your proposal can be improved and sometimes they will be right.

Finally, don't forget the layers of language. You need to be direct, but more importantly polite – and remember that what you regard as politeness may not be taken as such in the UK.



English, as spoken in the UK, is an imprecise language and your first few discussions may very well be vague only slowly coming to the detail you desire. This vagueness may lead you to believe that the imprecise language is backed up by imprecise thinking – and in the beginning this may be true.

But, by deliberate use of this vague approach, you may find that British opposite number has outmanoeuvred you and you may suddenly realise that you have given away more than you ever intended. In such circumstances, it is often useful to be guided by a native English-speaking Brit (not just English, not just fluent, but someone who has grown up there). However, you will need to be sure that you can trust them to represent you effectively and that they are not “playing both ends against the middle” as they say.

Other things to consider are price and quality. Your price is important but not to the total exclusion of value, although it may take some time for your British counterpart to come to this conclusion. For example, British companies have moved many of their overseas outsourced operations back to the UK due to high levels of customer complaint, but only after years of “pain” and customers leaving in droves to bring the British to this point.

Quality is vital providing it doesn't put up the price and in an outsourcing environment, they want YOU to protect their staff – while wanting them off their backs. Don't forget that labour related legislation is much more business friendly in UK than in other European countries.

So, after all this why would you want to do business in the UK, particularly given the additional complexity which will arise after Brexit. Well, first of all, it is easy to set up a company in the UK. Providing you have a local address, for a small fee you can simply register the name of your company and that is it. Secondly, the UK business environment is relatively open in comparison to most European countries and finally, the UK outsourcing market is the largest anywhere outside of the USA.

British enterprises are normally very open to overseas companies taking on their work – as long as the price is right, the quality is good and you are prepared to work their way. The potential downside to this is that the UK is a very mature outsourcing market and IT outsourcing has been a major factor in business for nearly 40 years. Therefore, although they may ask for the earth, British companies know very well what you can and cannot achieve. So, do not promise what you cannot deliver. And if

you fail to deliver the Brits will come down on you very, very hard (in the nicest possible way of course). For example, I was once asked to attend a meeting with a customer to discuss a couple of “small issues” relating to contract performance – at the meeting, joining the customer, were five contract lawyers. However, this situation is not usual, providing you are prepared to keep talking and attempt to resolve issues in good faith. If you are prepared to compromise and work through issues you will find that most problems can be resolved politely and without recourse to the law and remember that because English law is based on precedence – it can be very unreliable.

One final thought, something I find extraordinary about the British is their belief in fate. Although they sometimes seem to be quite miserable, deep down they believe that everything will be alright in the end, or as an Indian colleague once told me:

**EVERYTHING
WILL BE FINE IN
THE END AND IF
IT'S NOT FINE,
THEN IT'S NOT
THE END.**



Carola Copland is an independent consultant working with companies wishing to implement organisational efficiency through outsourcing, automation and strategic alignment of multiple programs. She is bi-lingual and works with the academic back-ground as a fully qualified German Lawyer. She is also a qualified Negotiator, Project Manager, and SAP Consultant. She has been responsible for developing, implementing and executing high scale strategic development and cultural change programs within growth market regions embracing all involved functions from a local to global level. Having held senior and international management

positions, she thinks that the well-fare, job satisfaction and enthusiasm of the people actually responsible for doing the job is an essential part for success or failure in business. Carola mainly focuses on interdisciplinary and people related aspects of operational efficiency: changing organisations, linking functions together, simplify and automate workflows to achieve operational excellence which better fit people's needs. Carola regards herself as an ambassador in the common pursuit for innovation and continuous improvement in an environment of exponentially increasing technological complexity and uncertainty.



Richard Avery has 35 years experience in international outsourcing consultancy, sales and delivery. As part of a Global Engagement Office he was one of few people who were designated to provide advice on setting up outsourcing delivery operations in locations as wide ranging as Brazil, Hungary, UAE and the Philippines. He has also delivered training and mentoring to outsourcing sales and delivery teams in over 30 countries on four continents. Richard's experience spans both the outsourcing supply and demand sides

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