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Belgium

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Meeting styles 

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Country introduction

Belgium, officially the Kingdom of Belgium, is a western European country with The Netherlands, Luxembourg, France and Germany as their neighbours. The country is 30,528 km² and has a population around 11 million inhabitants. The largest and most important city is Brussels, the capital of Belgium and the administrative centre of the European Union. Belgium enjoys a temperate sea climate, with moderate temperatures, strong westerly winds, heavy cloud and regular rainfall. (2012, belgium.be)

The history of Belgium starts several centuries before the beginning of western era, when Germanic tribes travelled cross the Rhine and settled in what we know now as Belgium. The name Belgium comes from the Romans in the 1st century BC. They moved into the area and called it 'Belgica'. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance Flanders was one of the most social en wealthiest economical regions in Europe. In the 17th century under the leadership of Willem van Oranje the Northern Netherlands made themself independent from the Spanish domination. After the independency of the Northern Netherlands a period of economic decline started for Flanders. The territory we now know as Belgium stayed for a longer period of time under the Spanish supervision. After the Spanish domination, the Austrian Habsburgers and Napoleon occupied the territory. From 1815 till 1830 the territory was part of the Dutch, after that period it became independent. The drafting of the Constitution was largely the product of the French bourgeoisie. French was also the only recognized language. These were the first problems in the current language struggle between the Flemings and the Walloons, which by the 'Equality' of 1898 also the Dutch languages was officially recognized.

Belgium has the 19th economy in the world. It's diversified and highly industrialized. The inhabitants of Belgium are highly educated and the country has a developed workforce. Belgium has a GDP (Gross Domestic Product) of \$37,374 per capita. Two of the biggest export industries of Belgium are the chocolate and medicine industry. In the past, steel was one of Belgium's main export products, but this industry is decreasing in the past few years. Other industries in Belgium where the export is decreasing the past few years are: biotechnology, chemicals, food processing and engineering. More important export industries of Belgium are: meat, wool, automobiles, crystal glass and beer. One of the main reasons Belgium is a real export country is the central location and the large seaport in Antwerp. Although

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only a small percentage of the population is involved in agriculture, they produce a sufficient amount of food to be self-sustaining. About three-fourth of the residents are employed in service industries. (2009, Martin and Chaney)

There is something special about the Belgium country. The country has not one, but three official languages. Approximately sixty percent of the population speak Dutch, mainly in the northern Flanders. Forty percent speak French, primarily in the southern Wallonia and less than one percent speaks German. But it is not the language that makes Belgium so special. Belgium is divided into two regions as already mentioned. These two regions are very different from each other, and this provides a division in the country. It is the difference between the regions within one country what makes Belgium an interesting country. So to understand the Belgium business culture, it is absolutely necessary to know the differences between the Walloons and the Flemish. It is also important to know that the Flemish are not Dutch and the Walloons are not French.

Meeting styles

When it comes to doing business in Belgium it is important to know how business is done and how business meetings are organized. These different aspects are going to be discussed. The first aspect of a meeting is the preparation. It is important to know how to be prepared and how to open a business meeting. Furthermore it is important to know how to act during the meeting and how to close the meeting. It is essential to know that business does not stop after a meeting in Belgium. An important question that needs to be answered is: what to do after a meeting with your potential business partners?

First of all, the preparation of a Belgian business meeting will be discussed. As in other countries it is important to build a solid relationship with your Belgian business partner. Be aware of the fact that there is a culture difference between the Flemish and the Walloons. The Belgians are conservative and careful. They will spend a lot of time in building the relationship and trust you like their business partner. To improve this relationship, it will help to search for background information about the history of the country and your potential business partners. Be prepared for long discussions, the Belgians will discuss all alternatives and will take them all under consideration. Make sure that you are not too confrontational and maintain an open attitude. Take care to be subtle and make sure you act not too directly. The Belgians have a lot of procedures and paperwork, so be aware of the fact that you have to take extra time to do business. It will not be appreciated and seen as a sign of disrespect if you arrive late on a meeting. Last but not least make sure that you handed out the agenda with the topics that will be discussed, so the Belgians can prepare themselves.

Secondly the opening of the business meeting is going to be discussed. On a first meeting it is best to introduce yourself with a handshake, a smile and direct eye contact to every business associate in the meeting. Start the meeting with small social talk. To get all attention at the beginning of the meeting, it is allowed to use mild Belgium humour to break the ice. A conversation with a mobile phone during the meeting will be seen as a lack of respect.

Furthermore it is important to know what happens during the meeting. The Belgians like structure. All topics will be discussed according to the order of the agenda. During a meeting with Walloons there is much more hierarchy and the

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manager is talking continually. Discussion with the managers is only accepted after he has finished his story. These meetings are very formal. During the Flemish meeting there is more interaction between the managers and employees and these meetings are more open and informal.

How do Belgians close the meeting? It is common to give a summary of the topics that are discussed. After closure, the Belgians like to have an overview of all appointments that are made during the meeting. Give the other partners the opportunity to ask some questions, they would like to have a discussion with you about the different problems or strategies that are being discussed. If the meeting is not the last one, it is logical to propose your business partner the date, time and location of the next meeting. At the end you give a short evaluation of the meeting and thank all the participants.

Business is not only done during the meeting, it is very useful to know what happens after the meeting. Do not rush off directly after the meeting, but spend some time with you potential business partners, so they know that you are willing to put time in improving the relationship. This is also a good moment to hand out your business card. It is advised to have the business card in French and Dutch to avoid any problems with the language. The Belgians like to lunch, have a dinner, or have a drink after the meeting with their potential business partners. If they invited you for one of these things, take this change to win the trust of your business partner. Good items to talk about are the topics that are discussed in the meeting, the history of Belgium, drinks and food that are produced in Belgium and family. Try to find some background information about these subjects before you visit Belgium. Some people will invite you at their home address. It is quite normal to bring a gift for the partner to improve your relationship before you start dinner. (2010, Flightpack Belgium) (2009, Martin and Chaney)

Interview summary

This e-book is part of the 'Cross Cultural Business Skills' minor programme at the University of Applied Sciences in Amsterdam. During this programme, we study the differences and similarities between the various European countries in terms of their business practices and customs. In particular, we are interested in the various different national styles of business meetings. We used two types of sources to study these differences. The first source we used is was 'desk research'. The second source we used to find information about the different national styles was by means of a survey. In the last period from March the 16th until May the 1st we sent around two hundred e-mails to companies and business people from Belgium with the request if they would like to fill out our survey. After a lot of e-mailing, sending reminder e-mails and approaching the business people that filled out the survey, we only got three responses. This chapter contains a summary of the outcome of their answers.

A business meeting in Belgium starts with small social talk or a discussion about the minutes of the last meeting. A typical meeting lasts between one hour and one-and-a-half hour. The managers of companies in the financial services or education sector organize business meetings more than once a week. It is important for the Belgians to have a clear overview of the things that need to be done. That is why the most Belgian managers organize the meetings in the morning. A person who participates in a fresh meeting in the morning thinks more clear than during a meeting later that day. Having meals during the meeting is allowed, it is common to have lunch during the meeting. PowerPoint slides are use, the average presentation is around 15 slides and hand-outs are distributed to all the participants at the meeting. There is no typical structure in which order the issues will be discussed. In some business meetings, it is common to follow the order as mentioned on the agenda. Another possibility is that the most important agenda points are discussed first. The chairperson in a meeting has a lot of influence in terms of the structure.

During the Belgian business meetings, there are no fixed seats around the negotiation table. The decisions that are made during the meetings are based on what the most authoritative people at the meeting propose. Though sometimes it can also be based on what the majority of the meeting wants. It depends on what kind of meeting it is. It also depends on how decisions are made within the meeting. During Belgian business meetings it is common to dress formally. Humour

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is accepted during meetings as it takes away tension, this does not mean that humour is encouraged. It is not absolutely obligatory to arrive on time. If you have a good reason and you contact your business partners that you are a bit late, it is not the end of the world. During Belgian meetings it is not seen as appropriate to make a phone call during the meeting. At meetings, no papers will be written or signed other than the minutes of the meeting. There is always someone who makes a summary of the meeting. They do not sign contracts or similar documents during meetings, but this does not mean that no decisions are being made.

Information sharing

To build a solid relationship and to do business, it is important to share information. Only if you share information it is possible to work together and to get to the optimal result. To do business you have to know the 'information sharing culture' of the people you are doing business with.

It is not easy to give general information about how easily the Belgians share their information. To answer this question the country needs to be divided into two parts, Wallonia and Flanders. In general the Belgians are not eager to share information if they do not benefit from it. They are rational minded people, but also commercial minded. There is a strict hierarchy and bosses do not tend to give a lot of information to their subordinates very often. When a company becomes larger, they usually get more different cultures among their employees so information sharing tends to be more open.

The Flemish people are more open for information sharing compared to Walloons. The Flemish are more team play orientated, so information sharing is easier. It should not be forgotten that even if they are more open for information sharing, this will only happen if they can benefit from it. Sharing information for them feels like giving away power, both the south and north feels that way. The Flemish tend to give the power away more easily because they like the idea of having of competition.

In the French speaking part of Belgium (Wallonia) hierarchy is stronger. This also does not make them share information easily. They rather tend to give information and other advantages to friends and family. This is because they (compared to the north) believe more in the saying: knowledge means power. (2010, Flightpack Belgium)

Display of emotions

People from different cultures react different on the same kind of situations. Therefore it is important to know and of course to understand the culture of your potential business partners. An essential aspect of a culture is the display of emotions. How do they react on different behaviours during the meeting, 'what' and more importantly 'how' can you say different things without disrupting the meeting. Also for the display of emotions, Belgium needs to be divided into two regions once more.

Flemish business meetings

During business meetings with Flemish people it is important to not use the French language. Some people find that French people or Walloons represent arrogance. When trying to make an agreement with a Flemish company it is essential to speak English or Dutch. The Flemish people have a pragmatic bent and a calm style. The manager and his staff will listen until you are finished with your presentation. After the presentation they will give you direct feedback. The Flemish people think that more ideas and input from different people will give the best result. During the meeting it is good to use humour. The Flemish like the informal style and your potential business partner will remember the humoristic performance as a good and natural presentation.

Walloon business meetings

The Walloon business meetings are different from the Flemish ones. If your goal is to achieve an agreement, then you have to communicate in the French language. The hierarchy is very important and not every staff member knows the strategy of the company. That is why the managers will lead the meeting and the employees only listen. Walloons are not the same as the French, because they are less obstinate than the French. Making jokes during the meeting is not-done. (1999, Lewis) (2010, Flightpack Belgium)

Rule of authority

The rule of authority is different in every culture. It is essential in business meeting to know which of your potential business partners is in charge. It is important to know how to deal with the manager. Is it allowed to interrupt him or do you have to wait until the manager gives you the opportunity to talk? A leak of knowledge about the authority during a meeting can totally destroy an upcoming result.

About the Belgian meeting style culture there can be said that hierarchy in leadership, decision-making and working together is accepted. The Belgians accept that there is a difference between people and that nobody is absolutely equal. The Geert Hofstede dimensions also support this. 'With a score of 65, Belgium scores high on the scale of the PDI (power distance index). It is therefore a society in which inequalities are accepted. Hierarchy is needed if not existential; the superiors may have privileges and are often inaccessible. The power is centralized in Belgium. It might in the near future not be Brussels anymore but the Walloons and Flemish will each have their own point of centralized power from where administration, transports, business, etc. are managed. In management, the attitude towards managers is more formal and on family name basis at least, in the first contact, the information flow is hierarchical. The way information is controlled is even associated with power, therefore unequally distributed. Control is normal, and even expected, but considered as formal and not key for efficiency.' (2012, Hofstede)

As we already mentioned Belgium is a special country, the main reason therefore is that the country has two regions that are different from each other. The Walloons are different to the Flanders. For example in the hierarchy during business meetings there is a big difference between how the Flanders and the Walloons approach a meeting. Therefore it is important to be aware of the fact that Walloons and Flemish have different views on hierarchy at work. The Flemish are much more equal at work and decisions are often made based on consensus. Consensus is when members of a group all have agreed with a decision. The Flemings are a lot more task delegated by the management than the Walloons. The Walloons are much more focused on the hierarchy within a company and all decisions are often made based on rank. The internal control of the management is greater for the Walloons than for the Flemish. So the Flemish have a lot more influence on the management when they are making decisions than the Walloons have on theirs. (1999, Lewis)

Reasoning styles

To understand your business partners it is useful to know what they want and how they want it. It is important to know something about their reasoning style and how they come to a certain conclusion. The Belgian reasoning style will be explained with several categories.

Straight thinking or flexible thinking

The Belgians are quite flexible they tend to be very problem solving. They are in for a discussion to solve argues and are willing to find the right solution for the problem. They tend to be compromising and avoid any big differences. During meetings the Belgian participants are expected to be part of the meeting and argue with each other, although it is important to know that this especially applies for the Flemish meetings. There is a bigger sense of hierarchy during Wallonia meetings. They tend to wait for the opinion of the manager first.

Rely on facts or more rational thinking

The Belgian people are in the middle of these two aspects. They value facts but do not rely entirely on them. They always try to combine the two aspects. Making a final decision can take some time because they will find the balance between facts and rational thinking. Data and facts are used to support different theories. For the Flemish people facts are more important than they are for the Walloons, they are doing business based on their feelings.

Easy or difficult to reason with

The Belgian people tend to be slightly difficult to reason and negotiate with, because there are a lot of differences between the Belgians. Also in this aspect there is a difference between the Flemish part and Wallonia. The Flanders are much more willing to compromise and have a direct approach. People from Wallonia are much more used that someone from a higher rank makes the decision. (2010, Flightpack Belgium)

Conclusion

It is essential to know with which Belgian people you are doing business, the Walloon or the Flemish. In general Belgian people are compromising and are willing to listen to everybody before running into conclusions. Their statements are made by facts and by rational thinking. Belgians tend to work slowly towards a conclusion, like this picture shows.



Appendix 1: Interview details

This chapter contains more specific details about the outcome of the survey we send to Belgians business people to study the differences and similarities among the various European countries in terms of their business practices and customs.

All the respondents have the Belgium nationality. The responses are from companies in the sector of Financial Services as well as they are in the education sector. The job titles of the respondents are Programme Manager, Project Management Officer, HR Generalist, Office Manager and Sales Manager. The headquarters of their companies are in Germany and Belgium. The job titles of the respondents are Executive Assistant to CEO, Corporate Communication Manager and Business Development Manager.

The business meetings in Belgium usually start with small talk, but there are also meetings that start with a discussion about the minutes of the last meeting. All the meetings of our responders are between one hour and one-and-a-half hour. Two out of our three respondents have their business meetings more than once a week. All our three the respondents have different times for their meetings. The first respondent has the meetings in the morning, the second is really flexible with any day any time and the third respondent has fixed days for the meeting. Those meetings are on Tuesday or Thursday. Having meals during the meeting is allowed, for two out of three it is common to have lunch during the meeting. PowerPoint slides are usually used during the meeting in Belgium, and the average presentation is around 15 slides. The order how issues are discussed is very different from each other. Issues are being discussed in the order as determined in the agenda, which was drafted before the meeting, in order of importance, as agreed on during the meeting itself and in the order as proposed by the chairperson. The chairman has a lot of influence. On a scale from 1 till 5 all our respondents rated the influence of the chairman with a 4. During the Belgium business meetings have the business people no fixed seats on the negotiation table. The decisions that are made during the meetings are based on what the most authoritative people at the meeting propose, but sometimes also based on what the majority at the meeting wants, which depends on what kind of meeting it is. It also depends on the meeting how the decisions are being made. In our research we have found out that it is not that important to dress formal to a business meeting. As we already find out in our desk research it is allowed to use humour in a business meeting. It is not absolutely

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obligatory to arrive on time. If you have a good reason and you contact your business partners that you are a bit late it is not the end of the world. During Belgian meetings it is not seen as appropriate to make a phone call during the meeting. It is common in Belgium that someone is taking notes during the meeting.

Appendix 2: Local meeting terminology

1. Agenda	Agenda Ordre du jour
2. Chairperson	Voorzitter Président
3. Minutes secretary	Notuleerder Secrétaire
4. Apologies for absence	Excuses voor afwezigheid Excusé pour absence
5. Agenda item number one	Punt één op de agenda Point un à l'ordre du jour
6. Other business	Varia Divers
7. Date and venue	Datum en plaats Lieu et date
8. To attend	Participeren Participer

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Colophon

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