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Morocco

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Introduction

Cross-cultural understanding is an important tool for any international businessperson, company or organisation to use when doing business abroad. The question, which comes to our minds in, this respect is: "How to communicate effectively with people from Morocco?".

Morocco is a parliamentary democracy and King Mohammed VI has been in power since 1999. The kingdom of Morocco is situated in North Western Africa and the capital is Rabat. Casablanca is the largest city in Morocco and Marrakech, Fèz, Meknes and Rabat are known as the imperial cities. There are approximately 32.2 million Moroccan residents in 2011. At this moment the population is still slightly increasing with a percentage growth rate of 1.099%, after a period of major growth.

The distance between Morocco and Spain is just 16 km at the closest point, the so-called "Strait of Gibraltar". Morocco is therefore the closest African country to Europe. Although Morocco is located this close, there are different cultural values.

Social aspects

In private

In order to really connect with Moroccans, one should focus on the personal relationship with them and show trust and loyalty. It is advisable not to try to show interest by asking personal questions about subjects such as personal beliefs, sex, the king or women's rights. This is considered to be unacceptable unless already a strong relationship has been established. Finally, sufficient effort must be put into establishing a relationship and being judgemental is strongly discouraged.

Moroccans can be very closed towards outsiders who do not respect the Moroccan culture.

Free time is mostly spent with family and predominantly takes place at home. Those moments can take a lot of time and sometimes even an entire weekend. Family bonds are very strong and it is hard for an outsider to fit in. The younger generation of the Moroccan citizens is becoming very materialistic and contact with the "West" also means exposure to other music, culture and manners.

It is important to learn the standard way to approach Moroccans, because an inappropriate method can cause damage in the first stage of the relationship. The first impression when meeting a Moroccan is vital and if it does not go well, a continuous and productive relationship can be difficult to achieve. Friends of the same gender will both shake hands and kiss each other on the left cheek at the same time.

Table manners



Before going to dinner one should wash ones' hands. Eating must be done with the first three fingers of the right hand. In the middle of the table is the main dish and next to this plate there are several salads. There is one salad dish for two or three people. Complicated dishes or sauces are eaten with bread. When someone almost has had enough to eat, one has to eat with little bites; otherwise other people will think they have to finish as well. When he is finishing eating, he may lick his fingers.

Religion

Religion is an important aspect of Moroccan culture with the Islam as the largest religion in Morocco: 98% of Moroccans are Muslim. Islam is the principal religion, but other religions like Christianity and Judaism are treated equally and with respect. There is a tolerance towards these religions. However, Christians and Jews are a minority in Morocco and they have to adjust their lifestyle to Islam. Nowadays Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world and therefore, while communicating in Morocco or with Moroccans, one should keep the special rules regarding this religion in mind.

Islam literally means surrender. Muslims should dedicate themselves to Allah's laws, the Sharia. The Koran is the holy book for Muslims. Most Muslims in Morocco are Sunni Muslims. Sunnis believe that they must follow the teachings of the prophet Mohammed as much as possible in eating and everyday habits, as well as in ethical behaviour. The Hadith, a collection of papers, which spread the teachings of Mohammed, is very important in this respect.

Governmental law in Morocco is partly based upon Islamic shari'ah law. When a foreigner is doing business in Morocco, one should abide by those rules as well. Despite several attempts the shari'ah law is not available in writing. Therefore everyone can give the law a different meaning. As a result, within the Islamic world

the shari'ah is confusing. One cannot think of Islamic shari'ah law as one regulatory, it is better to treat this piece as religious ethics. In Morocco, Shari'ah law is mostly family law next to the national Code.



A foreigner has to demonstrate an understanding of Islam. Muslims are obligated to pray five times a day and mosques announce the call to prayer. One has to take prayer times into account while planning appointments and meetings. On Fridays Muslims go to the Mosque to listen to the speech given by the Imam. During the month of Ramadan, Muslims fast from dawn till dusk, which means no eating, drinking or smoking during the day. During this month public life almost completely stops. There are two major festivals for Muslims: the end of the Ramadan and the end of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. It is best to respect these festivities and avoid doing business at those times.

The traditional Islamic greeting is "Asalam Alaykum", which means "peace be with you". Moroccans are informal with names and generally address people by their first name. In an initial meeting one should keep in mind that Moroccans should be addressed by their formal titles: "Sidi ..." means "Mr ...".

Non verbal communication

Meet and greet

There are some special rules when it comes to meeting a female Muslim colleague. It may happen that she is not looking at a male during the conversation, because she is conservative and is showing her respect by not looking at him. When this happens do not be offended, but act in the same manner for the sake of politeness.

Men should always shake hands with women and it is only allowed to give her a kiss if she offers him her cheek. If she does, kiss her on the cheek three times alternately. Male colleagues should wait for her to reach out her hand before shaking it, and if she does not, simply give a friendly bow.

In addition to this it is important to keep direct eye contact when having a conversation with a male colleague. If the head is turned away from the colleague, it either indicates that one is in thought or does not agree with the other's points of view.

When conducting conversation, Moroccans have a tendency to stand close to the person they are talking to. When this happens do not back away as it can be considered as offensive. When people of the same gender meet each other, it is very normal to offer a handshake, and this is also the case when meeting new colleagues. However, be very careful not to use the left hand, as this hand is considered "impure", due to its use for personal hygiene. Eating and shaking hands ought to be done with the right hand.

Subsequently, foreign businesspersons visiting Morocco are not recommended to show disapproval or criticize their colleagues in public as it will be perceived as losing face. Honour, rank and dignity are very precious to Moroccan people, if not the most valuable possession they have in life. They will avoid conflicts to maintain their honour and dignity

Listening styles

Whilst in negotiation or business planning with Moroccan counterparts, patience is of essence. One should take time to understand the situation when there is an issue and try to look further into the problem.

Also, try to get used to the speed of the meetings, as Moroccans do not like to be forced or rushed. When in a conversation be friendly and try to be open. They appreciate it when attention is given and interest is shown and are more than willing to return the favour.

Since networking has become very popular, it has become vital in forming relationships, where requesting mutual favours is advantageous. Getting involved in conversations and activities will build up this trust even more. Moroccans love to spend time together and they are great hosts. Enjoy the moment provided by the host and participate when asked. Refusing any form of hospitality will be perceived as offensive by your host.

It is highly advisable to make use of the services of an interpreter when travelling to Morocco for business. Choose one that speaks Arabic fluently and is comfortable speaking it. It is better to choose an interpreter who understands the way Moroccans communicate, their body language, non verbal signs, hand gestures and so on, rather than hiring one simply for translating the words and phrases.

Writing styles

The two main types of written Arabic are "classic Arabic" and "modern standard Arabic". Classic Arabic is used in classical literature and it differs from modern standard Arabic for the most part in its style and vocabulary. All Muslims are required to have knowledge of this original language, which is also used in the Koran. Nevertheless, many Muslims use translations in order to understand the words of the Classic Arabic language.

On the other hand, modern standard Arabic is the language of the majority and is understood by all Arabic speakers. It is the universal language of the Arabic world and is used in for example lectures and written material. As can be seen in the annex on the last page, the Arabic alphabet does not look anything like the Western alphabet (e.g. the Arabic alphabet is written from left to right, it is written in cursive and has 28 basic letters instead of the Western 26).

Hand gestures

Moroccan people prefer to use facial expressions and hand gestures instead of using words. These hand gestures may differ from those used in Western cultures (e.g. making an o-shape with the thumb and index finger may have a positive meaning like "OK" or "good" in other countries, but in Morocco it means "zero" or "bad").

Another hand gesture often used by Moroccans to bring someone closer, is to signal with the whole hand instead of just a single finger. After a handshake they lay their right hand briefly on their heart.

In addition to this, if they are thirsty they stretch their thumb on their lips to point this out.

Verbal communication

In general, humans use more nonverbal communication than verbal communication. However, possessing knowledge of the Moroccan language (Arabic or Berber) is essential to effectively exploit opportunities in the Moroccan society. The Berber language, which is divided into several dialects, is spoken by only 30% of the Moroccan population. (Standard) Arabic is the official language, while Moroccan Arab (Darija) is spoken more widely. French is the third unofficial language and in some areas in the north of Morocco Spanish is still spoken.

These days most business in Morocco is done in the French language, while a few companies prefer doing business in Arabic or English (this is more comfortable in some situations). Because formality is highly valued, it is very important as a businessman to respect one another and to be professional. A foreigner should be patient while talking and listening to a Moroccan, as they will not overload with information.

In general, Moroccan people tend to hold back and rather imply meaning, using certain chosen words or actions. As such, it takes some time to really understand the context of a discussion or conversation.

On the other hand, it is also important to choose words carefully. The Arabic language has, like any other language, words and phrases, which have more than one meaning. Moroccans could easily interpret something incorrectly.



Finally, it is highly recommended to communicate with people in person. This provides more comfort and clarity for everyone and in addition, technology in Morocco may not be as advanced as in other parts of the world.

Doing business

Relationships

Moroccans do not make a distinction between professional and personal life and when doing business, personal relationships, family, trust and honour are very important. Personal matters are prioritised above everything else. Moroccans are very involved in, and place a lot of value on, business relationships. This is why it is important to take time to build up a relationship with them. Hospitality is considered a social duty. Politeness and formality are the rule. If a foreigner has friends in the right places then things can be done more quickly. The system works on the idea that favours are never forgotten.

Honour

Within a business context people must avoid "hshuma" (shame) and even must keep up appearances to avoid it, because otherwise others will know that the specific person has failed or has behaved improperly. To avoid "hshuma" the expression "mashi mushkil" (no problem) is often used, but that should not be taken seriously as this expression is used to avoid shame. Self-control is both highly respected and rewarded.

Meetings

A great deal of time can pass before establishing a good business relationship. Many face-to-face meetings and discussions are required for a Moroccan to let an outsider into its life. Business meetings often take place in offices and it is sensible to know which language will be used during the meeting. Business meetings always begin with small talk, introductions to one another and also mint tea and coffee are served.

Meetings should not be organised too far in advance, because of personal circumstances, which might arise. If one makes an appointment, please note that it should be confirmed verbally a few days before. The key concept to doing successful business in Morocco is building trust.

Moroccans manage an open door policy, which means that a meeting can be interrupted more than a few times. In this respect do not expect a strict agenda in a meeting. Meetings can be chaotic, because of interruptions like phone calls and people entering the meeting room, therefore one should be patient. Issues may be raised during the meeting as well. Punctuality is expected from foreigners, however Moroccans are rarely punctual.

Presenting

To be successful in a business presentation it is important to follow certain guidelines. Due to the strong beliefs of Muslims, it is better to emphasize what the company has achieved over the last years. Talking about future plans or ideas will not last long in people's memory. According to Muslim believes, the future has already been determined by God. Moroccans place a lot of value on a clear story with much more than only abstract information.

Images, tables and graphics must back up a story, if this fits. Once again, as a foreigner one should adapt to the Moroccan culture and therefore, it is useful to think about what to wear and how to react to unexpected questions while presenting, as well as if people leave the room for phone calls.

Finally, it is considered the norm to have some time afterwards to ask questions, but Moroccans will respect the speaker as a leader and will not easily put him on the spot.

Business attire

To Moroccan business people, appearance is very important. That is why they are always well dressed, especially when going to meetings or gatherings. Because they do so, Moroccans expect their colleagues to look their best as well. The dress code is formal and conservative (e.g. men should wear a suit and tie and women should wear a business suit or a dress). Women should be careful with what they wear, as their clothing style should be appropriate at all times. The shoulders have to be covered and the dress should at least cover the knee. Foreigners should be careful wearing accessories or jewellery that promote their own religious beliefs or heritage. Moroccans see this as a sign of being unwilling to show respect.

Business cards

Business cards should be translated into French. However, if a business card is also translated into Arabic, it is a sign of respect and may bring about a positive benefit. Do not forget to present the business card so the translated side of the card faces the receiver.

Annex

The Arabic alphabet

Arabische alfabet					
ا	alif	<i>de lange klinker aa</i>	د	daad	<i>d (beklemtoonde d)</i>
ب	baa	<i>b</i>	ط	ta	<i>t (beklemtoonde t)</i>
ت	taa	<i>t</i>	ظ	dhaal	<i>dh (beklemtoonde dh)</i>
ث	thaa	<i>th (zachte Engelse th)</i>	ع	ayn	<i>'ayn (met stemspleet als in 'uh-oh')</i>
ج	jeem	<i>dj (zacht, zoals in jazz)</i>	غ	ghayn	<i>r, gh (sterke huig-r zoals in het Duits)</i>
ح	ha	<i>ha (zwaar geaspireerde h-klank)</i>	ف	feh	<i>f</i>
خ	kha	<i>kh (zoals Spaanse jota)</i>	ق	qaaf	<i>q</i>
د	daal	<i>d</i>	ك	kaaf	<i>k</i>
ذ	dhal	<i>dh (harde Engelse th)</i>	ل	laam	<i>l</i>
ر	ra	<i>r (rollende r)</i>	م	meem	<i>m</i>
ز	zain	<i>z</i>	ن	noon	<i>n</i>
س	seen	<i>s</i>	ه	ha	<i>h (aangeblazen h)</i>
ش	sheensh		و	waaw	<i>w, oo</i>
ص	saad	<i>s (beklemtoonde s)</i>	ي	yaaw	<i>y, ee</i>

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