



## FINNISH WORKING CULTURE

### Ground rules:

1. Observe, analyze, think and watch with open mind everything that happens around you.
2. Ask! Show your interest and your willingness to understand. How things are done here? Why do we do it like this and not like that? Is this a Finnish practice or especially this organization's way of doing things?
3. Learn Finnish language! Understanding the local language helps you to get into the culture of your workplace and to get to know your colleagues, even if the official working language is English.
4. Starting point: You cannot change the others - even less the culture of a whole nation! Start with understanding yourself:
  - What are your values, norms and attitudes that affect your behavior and thinking?
  - What kind of pre-assumptions you have regarding work life?
  - What is a good employee like? A good boss? A good colleague?
  - What makes team work and communication effective and/or pleasant?
  - Is it good or bad for an employee to be very self-motivated and independent?
  - Who is responsible for the results and the quality of the work?
  - Can you disagree with your superiors?
  - How should you react if you make a mistake? (Or your colleague makes an mistake?)
5. Cultural differences: Remember that cultural differences are not about who is right and who is wrong. Finnish way of doing things is not better or worse than, say, Indian or Latin American. Things are just done differently in different cultures – and there can be a good reason for that. Try to find that reason!
6. Metacommunication means communicating about communication situations : If you face communicational difficulties and you think that cultural differences may lie underneath it, you should try to express it aloud: These are the occasions where cultural values and norms may confront and misunderstandings often happen. Once you have acknowledged them and know

how to face the situations in a calm, analytical and cooperative way, you are already quite far in becoming an interculturally competent person.

## The characteristics of Finnish working culture

Since Finnish companies and other workplaces can vary a lot, it is impossible to give any detailed "Do's and don'ts" lists about the Finnish working culture. There is definitely certain cultural characteristics, though, that you should be aware of. Reflect your own knowledge and habits against these:

1. Self-motivation: In Finland, more than in many other countries, it is expected from the employees that they are independent and self-motivated. Your boss will not always be there for you, advising and ensuring you will get the job done. You need to carry your responsibility and make sure yourself that your tasks will be done by the deadline. Positively thinking: You can often do your job quite freely as long as you show that you understand the rules of the workplace and show that you are capable of completing your tasks as agreed.
2. Openness to development ideas: Contradicting opinions are often welcomed if they are well rationalized and they aim for better working results. Sometimes it happens in a direct contact with your superiors, sometimes in annual development workshops or team meetings. Also, if you notice that your daily routines could be done in a more effective way, it is usually okay to suggest some changes.
3. If you don't know it – ask! It is always better to acknowledge that you don't know something and to ask for help than to do the task wrong. By asking you show your motivation to learn. If you make a mistake, tell it to your boss and think about a way to resolve it together. It is human to make a mistake. A Finnish common phrase "*Virheistä oppii*" tells that mistakes are actually learning chances and that you will do better next time.
4. Saying no is not impolite: In Finland it is accepted to tell 'no' even to your superiors. You should just always add an explanation. It is better to say: "I do not think I can do it" and explain why not, rather than to say: "Sure sure, I will take care of it" even when you already know it will not happen. It is considered as a sign of reliability: the employer can trust that you mean what you say.
5. Time orientation: In general, Finns follow a linear and quite strict concept of time – especially at work.
  - Your daily working hours are based on a contract and usually supervised in some way.
  - If the meeting is announced to begin at 10 a.m. you should be there a couple of minutes before 10.
  - Being late may happen but it is not socially acceptable. Being on time shows respect towards the others.
  - If you are given a deadline, it really means that the job needs to be finished by that date. You must plan your working according to that. If you notice that you

will not meet the deadline or your task is not clear, inform your superiors and the team about it immediately, explain the reason and agree together on how to proceed.

6. When do we have an agreement? Finns rely a lot on written agreements. If something is on paper (meeting memo ect.) it is considered agreed. Also, your word will be taken literally: if you say "I can do it" it is understood as a promise.
7. Following the rules: Although the employee is expected to be independent and self-motivated, it is also important to follow the rules to the detail. Many rules are based on laws and the employers cannot dismiss them. It is especially important to follow the rules regarding the safety and customership. Sometimes all this bureaucracy and strictness may seem frustrating, but remember that even weird rules may be based on reasons that are not familiar to you. If you think that following some rule may not be necessary, consult your superior first.
8. Task vs. relationship orientation: At workplaces task orientation is valued and emphasized. It may appear that your Finnish colleague focuses only on the task in hand and doesn't bother with socializing. This may not be exactly true: at Finnish workplaces socializing is often narrowed on work topics and relations. This due to the separation of the concepts of private and public. However, in working life team working and networking skills and overall human relations skills are more and more valued.
9. Politeness, addressing, respecting others' working time: Compared worldwide, Finnish working culture is very informal and free. It is, however, important to be polite:
  - Public (work) and private life are much more separated than in many other countries. Be careful about how much and how quickly you start asking about your colleague's personal life, their families for example. Consider also how much, how quickly and with whom you share your own personal life with.
  - When getting to know your colleagues, start with more common subjects. Your jobs, careers and happenings at workplace are good, neutral topics for example. It is advisable to wait until your conversation companion makes the initiative to move onto more personal level.
  - Greeting: It is polite to greet when you pass somebody, but - unlike in many other countries - it is not necessary to address everybody when you arrive and leave work. In meetings it is common to introduce and maybe shake hands with those who do not know each other already. Shaking hands is the most common and preferred way of greeting in formal situations. Hugs and kisses on a cheek indicate a longer professional relations or partnership. If you do not feel comfortable with shaking hands, you can for example give a small bow. Consider however if shaking hands would be acceptable for you in professional situations. Shaking hands is almost an automatic habit for Finns, and they do notice if you do not respond to an already offered hand. People working in international surroundings may be more used to different forms of greetings.
10. Hierarchy: Unlike often told, there actually are hierarchical structures in Finnish workplaces and they vary from field to field. When compared worldwide, though, the expression of hierarchy

(appearance, working conditions, addressing, the final closure at meetings ect.) is often suppressed. Hierarchy is indicated with small, often tacit gestures, and a new (foreign) worker should consciously look for these. The power position is based on the demands and the responsibility of a job description and also on how much the work community respects and appreciates the person's input and expertise. A person's position is usually not dependent on his/her age or gender. It is always safest to show respect to all other workers because their position in the hierarchy may not be visible.

#### 11. Speech patterns and silence in conversations:

- The tempo of a conversation is often much lower in Finland than in many other countries. Small silences in a middle of a conversation are normal and not to be rushed to fill. It is not necessary to keep the conversation going all the time. However, it is polite to answer if somebody speaks to you.
- Interrupting is considered rude, especially in formal occasions. You should wait until the other person finishes the sentence, then it is your turn and he/she listens. Finns indicate with a level eye contact that they are listening to you, rather than carrying on the conversation by giving minimal feedback ("Uhhuh", "Oh", "Yeah?" ect.) or dropping small questions in between your sentences.
- The following saying is highly appreciated in Finnish working life: *"Say what you mean, mean what you say"*. This means that you should not speak just for the sake of speaking. Speak when you have something meaningful and relevant to say. As one foreigner who has lived in Finland for a long time said: *"Beware – they (Finns) are really listening to you!"*