



Intercultural school
Talents pour le monde

EPREUVES D'ADMISSION

Session mai 2017

4 CIT

ANGLAIS

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Navigating British Culture: How the Brits Conduct Business

Anyone strolling the streets of London at 17.30 on a given Friday will observe a remarkable feature of British society: the pubs are heaving. Smartly dressed men and women clutch pints while loudly reminiscing about the week's happenings or excitedly anticipating the weekend to come. If our observer would pay attention to the conversations, he or she would probably be at a loss trying to make sense of this highly associative, humorous banter. Yet it forms an essential part of British culture and an important aspect of British workplace culture, and - if you haven't already done so - it won't be long before you find yourself clutching a pint after work in the company of co-workers doing the same.

Relocating to a new country does not imply profound changes only at home. Changes within the work environment can be equally daunting. Expatriates sent on an international assignment might expect a certain similarity to the workplace back home. But even in these modern times when companies try to implement global policies and minimise local and cultural differences, differences do persist. Working effectively across cultures and within multicultural teams is a very real challenge. As stated quite radically by Geert Hofstede, renowned for his work on cultural influence on values in the workplace, "Culture is more often a source of conflict than of synergy. Cultural differences are a nuisance at best and often a disaster."

So what IS culture? It can be characterised by a set of shared fundamental values, beliefs and attitudes within a certain group, shaping the behaviour of its members. This "group" can be a country's population, an East End gang, a Papua mountain tribe or a bunch of colleagues working for a multinational corporation. When attempting to make sense of cultural differences among different groups, it's helpful to try to identify the key cultural assumptions present within a group. These can be explained in terms of certain core cultural dimensions or value polarities that distinguish cultures. For instance, think of social stratification or power relations (hierarchy versus equality), social identification (individualism versus group orientation), rule application (universalism versus particularism) and communication styles (e.g., direct versus indirect). We can examine culture by identifying how it is shaped by these dimensions