

Doing It a Little Bit Differently Across the Pond¹

Some cross-cultural² differences in verbal and non-verbal behaviours³ in office environments

Michael Gaylord examined⁴ how transatlantic⁵ cultural differences in business environments can impact on⁶ the success or failure⁷ of business relationships⁸. He found that subtle⁹ differences don't always go unnoticed¹⁰, and even some of those that seem to be undetected¹¹ can have an important influence in a rapidly¹² changing business world.

Have you sometimes observed that there's something slightly different about the mannerisms¹³ of foreigners that you've come into contact with¹⁴ through your work, but you can't always put your finger on it¹⁵? Does his or her attitude seem to be more or less casual¹⁶ than those of you and your co-workers? Do you wonder¹⁷ if his or her business attire¹⁸ is typical for work environments back in his country of origin¹⁹? Are you curious to know if he/she finds some elements of behaviour occurring in Polish businesses to be strange? Do you want to make sure that some of the perceived²⁰ differences don't get in the way of²¹ successful business dealings²² and working relationships?

Since Poland has joined the European Union, foreign investment in Poland, as well as international business dealings, have increased substantially²³. As a consequence²⁴, Polish professionals are dealing with more and more native English speakers²⁵ or with fluent²⁶ English speakers who are proficient²⁷ in English as their second language. The need for continued improvement²⁸ in English language fluency in writing and speaking has been

stressed a lot. Business English learning opportunities are numerous²⁹, and managers and other professionals in corporate/business environments in Poland have been trying to catch up to³⁰ their western European counterparts³¹ in terms of³² their overall³³ English language fluency. It appears as if they've done very well in this

respect³⁴. However, going virtually³⁵ unnoticed, but in reality equally important for enhancing³⁶ communication, are language and non-language features³⁷ of communication that cannot be so easily measured³⁸. We're talking about cultural communication norms; that is, the aspects of communication that occur in the business

¹ **across the pond** | za oceanem

² **cross-cultural** | międzykulturowy

³ **behaviour** | zachowanie

⁴ **to examine** | zbadać (dogłębnie)

⁵ **transatlantic** | zaatlantycki, transatlantycki

⁶ **to impact on sth** | wpłynąć na coś

⁷ **failure** | porażka

⁸ **relationship** | związek, relacja

⁹ **subtle** | subtelny

¹⁰ **to go unnoticed** | przejść niepostrzeżenie, nie odbić się echem

¹¹ **undetected** | nie do wykrycia

¹² **rapidly** | szybko

¹³ **mannerism** | nawyk, zwyczaj

¹⁴ **to come into contact with sb** | wejść z kimś w kontakt

¹⁵ **sb can't put one's finger on it...** | ktoś nie wie dokładnie, co jest nie tak

¹⁶ **casual** | swobodny, luźny

¹⁷ **to wonder** | zastanawiać się

¹⁸ **attire** | ubiór, strój

¹⁹ **country of origin** | kraj pochodzenia

²⁰ **perceived** | postrzegany

²¹ **to get in the way of sth** | przeszkadzać czemuś/w czymś

²² **dealings** | interesy, kontakty

²³ **substantially** | znacząco

²⁴ **as a consequence** | w wyniku (tego), wskutek (tego)

²⁵ **native speaker** | rodzimy użytkownik języka, nosiciel języka

²⁶ **fluent** | płynny

²⁷ **proficient** | biegły

²⁸ **improvement** | usprawnianie, ulepszenie

²⁹ **numerous** | liczny

³⁰ **to catch up to/with sb** | nadążyć za kimś, nadgonić kogoś

³¹ **counterpart** | odpowiednik

³² **in terms of** | pod względem, jeśli chodzi o

³³ **overall** | ogólny

³⁴ **in this respect** | w tej kwestii, pod tym względem

³⁵ **virtually** | praktycznie

³⁶ **to enhance** | zwiększyć, poprawić

³⁷ **feature** | cecha

³⁸ **to measure** | zmierzyć



world that are unique³⁹ to one culture. How do these norms affect⁴⁰ business relations? What do we need to be aware of⁴¹ to ensure⁴² that communication norms do not undermine⁴³ business dealings? And, to put a positive spin on⁴⁴ it, how can a refined⁴⁵ understanding of such differences even enhance business relations?

There are some practical reasons why being aware of differences in cultural norms in the professional community⁴⁶ is important. First of all, according to⁴⁷ John Michela, a professor of organizational psychology and management studies at the University of Waterloo

in Ontario, Canada, the success of business dealings between two parties often hinges on⁴⁸ factors that fall outside of⁴⁹ simply communicating clearly in a verbal or written manner. The behaviours, customs⁵⁰, traditions that a foreigner brings to the table⁵¹, and in turn⁵² having the newcomer⁵³ be aware of similar corresponding⁵⁴ norms in the receiving⁵⁵ culture (in this case, Poland), can play a part in maintaining⁵⁶ mutual respect⁵⁷ and enhancing business relations. "Awareness of differences can minimize the possibility of misunderstandings⁵⁸ that could breed⁵⁹ negative confrontations (passive or otherwise) and lead to damaging⁶⁰ the relationship and eventually⁶¹ the deal. It's

important to accept these differences even if you don't agree with them," states Michela. Also, specific non-verbal behaviours can have different meanings in different cultures, and understanding these differences can help to eliminate⁶² potential misinterpretations⁶³ of physical actions⁶⁴. During my first year in Poland, I remember putting myself in a very awkward situation. It was at the meeting with a male/female couple⁶⁵ that I was doing business with. I enthusiastically greeted⁶⁶ and shook hands with⁶⁷ the man first - before I introduced myself to⁶⁸ the woman, which set⁶⁹ an uneasy⁷⁰ tone to the entire⁷¹ ensuing⁷² conversation - I simply did not understand that in Poland it's important to address⁷³ the woman first, even in business environments. Secondly, the organizational principles⁷⁴ of our societies⁷⁵ play a role in determining⁷⁶ how we communicate. The ways by which we structure our work teams, manage, divide up⁷⁷ and negotiate⁷⁸ our physical environments and manage our peer⁷⁹ relationships (at work and outside of work) influence our cultural communication norms. For example, during team meetings in North America, it is not a common practice⁸⁰ for all members who are involved in⁸¹ the meeting to take notes⁸². Emphasis is placed upon⁸³ verbal expression and it is a priority to give each member a chance to state their perspective⁸⁴, regardless of⁸⁵ their hierarchical position within ►

³⁹ **unique** | unikalny, wyjątkowy

⁴⁰ **to affect** | wpływać

⁴¹ **to be aware of sth** | być czegoś świadomym, wiedzieć o czymś

⁴² **to ensure** | zapewnić, upewnić (się)

⁴³ **to undermine** | podkopywać, osłabiać, podważać

⁴⁴ **to put a spin on sth** | nadać czemuś jakiś ton, przedstawić coś w jakimś świetle

⁴⁵ **refined** | wyrafinowany, dopracowany

⁴⁶ **community** | społeczność

⁴⁷ **according to** | zgodnie z, według, zależnie od

⁴⁸ **to hinge on sth** | być zależnym od czegoś

⁴⁹ **to fall outside of sth** | znajdować się poza czymś, nie zaliczać się do czegoś

⁵⁰ **custom** | obyczaj, zwyczaj

⁵¹ **to bring sth to the table** | włożyć coś od siebie, mieć jakiś wkład (w coś)

⁵² **in turn** | z kolei

⁵³ **newcomer** | nowo przybyły, nowicjusz

⁵⁴ **corresponding** | odpowiedni, analogiczny

⁵⁵ **receiving** | odbierający

⁵⁶ **to maintain** | podtrzymać, utrzymać

⁵⁷ **mutual respect** | wzajemny szacunek

⁵⁸ **misunderstanding** | nieporozumienie

⁵⁹ **to breed sth** | wywołać coś, zrodzić coś

⁶⁰ **to damage sth** | uszkodzić coś, przynieść szkodę

⁶¹ **eventually** | ostatecznie, w końcu

⁶² **to eliminate** | usunąć

⁶³ **misinterpretation** | niewłaściwa interpretacja czegoś, nadinterpretacja

⁶⁴ **action** | czynność, działanie

⁶⁵ **couple** | para

⁶⁶ **to greet** | powitać

⁶⁷ **to shake hands with sb** | uściśnąć komuś dłoń, podać sobie/komuś ręce

⁶⁸ **to introduce oneself to sb** | przedstawić się komuś

⁶⁹ **to set** | ustalić, nadać (np. ton)

⁷⁰ **uneasy** | kłopotliwy

⁷¹ **entire** | cały

⁷² **ensuing** | następujący, wywiązujący się, następny

⁷³ **to address sb** | zwrócić się do kogoś

⁷⁴ **principle** | zasada, reguła

⁷⁵ **society** | społeczeństwo

⁷⁶ **to determine** | wyznaczyć, określić

⁷⁷ **to divide sth up** | podzielić (coś między kogoś), przydzielić (coś komuś)

⁷⁸ **to negotiate** | *tu*: znajdować drogę, nawigować, lawirować

⁷⁹ **peer** | rówieśnik, równy

⁸⁰ **common practice** | powszechnie przyjęty sposób działania, zwyczajowy sposób działania

⁸¹ **involved in sth** | zaangażowany w coś

⁸² **to take notes** | robić notatki

⁸³ **to place emphasis on sth** | kłaść nacisk na coś

⁸⁴ **perspective** | punkt widzenia

⁸⁵ **regardless of** | niezależnie od

the team. Only one person is appointed⁸⁶ to take minutes⁸⁷, and he or she is responsible for⁸⁸ later typing⁸⁹ them out and distributing⁹⁰ them. Furthermore⁹¹, there is no direct correlation between⁹² hierarchical position and leading or chairing⁹³ the meeting. In other words, subordinates⁹⁴ as well as managers typically rotate⁹⁵ these duties. With respect to⁹⁶ building social relationships with co-workers, it's not uncommon⁹⁷ for co-workers to venture out⁹⁸ together for a drink after work; however, the degree⁹⁹ to which the co-workers become close friends varies¹⁰⁰ according to the individuals¹⁰¹.

Although the extracurricular¹⁰² peer relationship alluded to¹⁰³ above may be similar between Poland and North

America, if we scrutinize¹⁰⁴ work environments within the two cultures closer, we can find differences in degrees of formality. For instance¹⁰⁵, according to Sylwia Sikorska, a property¹⁰⁶ manager at Mercedes Benz in Warsaw, in Polish business culture it is important to match¹⁰⁷ one's wardrobe¹⁰⁸ with the work occasion. For example, if she is meeting an important client or attending¹⁰⁹ an important event¹¹⁰ within work, she'll wear a suit. During most regular days, formal clothing is the norm. She even keeps a change of clothes¹¹¹ in her office in case it's necessary to adjust¹¹² her suit to the tasks¹¹³ that are scheduled¹¹⁴ within one given day. "But black jeans are allowed on some days," she acknowledges¹¹⁵. Such care and attention to¹¹⁶ dress would be the

exception¹¹⁷ in North America, where 'casual Fridays' have become the norm in most business environments outside of the financial sector. Knowing that for an American or Canadian co-worker¹¹⁸ it's common to wear jeans and a casual shirt – even in an office on a weekday¹¹⁹ – will help Polish employees to know that the foreigner's dress¹²⁰ doesn't reflect¹²¹ a lax¹²² ideology or frivolous¹²³ attitude towards work ethic.

Differences in cultural business norms can be examined from the perspective of gender¹²⁴ expectations¹²⁵ in various regions. However, most studies on the differences in the group dynamics between and among genders (that is, in male-dominated¹²⁶ business environments) indicate¹²⁷ very few differences between North America and Poland. The differences in office behaviour are attributed to¹²⁸ more fundamental disparities¹²⁹ between the two sexes¹³⁰ than to those between societies that are compared¹³¹. For instance, in a study of several Warsaw and Chicago women who worked in management positions in business, Maslyk-Musial and Gundy found that the style of U.S. and Polish business counterparts was similar, with both groups emphasising openness in communication, participative¹³² decision-making¹³³, and taking time and many factors into consideration¹³⁴ in the decision-making process. Differences that have been found between women's behaviour and their attitudes toward work have been limited but, nonetheless, are interesting to consider¹³⁵. For example: the same authors found, in a study that took place between DePaul University in Chicago and Lublin University, that Polish women who led private businesses were less experienced than Americans in running¹³⁶ them, but more determined¹³⁷ (for example, they took an average¹³⁸ time of 5 years – vs.¹³⁹ 8 for the U.S. women – to set up¹⁴⁰ a business). Furthermore, Maslyk-Musial found that Polish women were much more likely to report¹⁴¹ feeling the need to have the additional¹⁴² role of "being sexy" than their American counterparts. Women in *both* countries felt that they alone were responsible for their successes

- ⁸⁶ **to appoint** | wyznaczyć
⁸⁷ **to take minutes** | protokolować
⁸⁸ **responsible for** | odpowiedzialny za
⁸⁹ **to type** | napisać (na klawiaturze/maszynie)
⁹⁰ **to distribute** | rozprowadzić
⁹¹ **furthermore** | co więcej
⁹² **direct correlation between sth and sth** | bezpośrednia współzależność między czymś a czymś
⁹³ **to chair sth** | przewodniczyć czemuś
⁹⁴ **subordinate** | podwładny
⁹⁵ **to rotate** | rotować, zamieniać (się cyklicznie, np. rolami)
⁹⁶ **with respect to doing sth** | jeśli chodzi/mowa o czymś
⁹⁷ **it's not uncommon...** | nie jest (niczym) dziwnym/niezwykłym...
⁹⁸ **to venture out** | wypuścić się/zapuścić się (gdzieś)
⁹⁹ **degree** | stopień
¹⁰⁰ **to vary** | różnić się, różnicować się
¹⁰¹ **individual** | osoba, jednostka
¹⁰² **extracurricular** | ponadprogramowy, dodatkowy
¹⁰³ **alluded to** | opisywany, wspomniany (wcześniej, wyżej)
¹⁰⁴ **to scrutinize** | przypatrzeć się czemuś (uważnie)
¹⁰⁵ **for instance** | na przykład
¹⁰⁶ **property** | nieruchomości, majątek
¹⁰⁷ **to match** | dopasować (się), dostosować (się)
¹⁰⁸ **wardrobe** | garderoba, ubiór
¹⁰⁹ **to attend** | uczęszczać, być obecnym
¹¹⁰ **event** | wydarzenie
¹¹¹ **a change of clothes** | ubrania na zmianę
¹¹² **to adjust** | dopasować, dostosować

- ¹¹³ **task** | zadanie
¹¹⁴ **scheduled** | zaplanowany
¹¹⁵ **to acknowledge** | przyznać
¹¹⁶ **attention to sth** | uwaga na coś, drobiazgowość w czymś
¹¹⁷ **exception** | wyjątek
¹¹⁸ **co-worker** | współpracownik, kolega z pracy
¹¹⁹ **weekday** | dzień powszedni
¹²⁰ **dress** | strój, ubiór
¹²¹ **to reflect** | odzwierciedlać
¹²² **lax** | luźny, rozluźniony
¹²³ **frivolous** | niepoważny
¹²⁴ **gender** | płeć
¹²⁵ **expectation** | oczekiwanie
¹²⁶ **male-dominated** | zdominowany przez mężczyzn
¹²⁷ **to indicate sth** | oznaczać, wskazywać na coś
¹²⁸ **to be attributed to sth** | być przypisywanym czemuś
¹²⁹ **disparity** | różnica, nierówność
¹³⁰ **sex** | płeć
¹³¹ **to compare** | porównywać
¹³² **participative** | *tu*: wspierający/propagujący uczestnictwo
¹³³ **decision-making** | podejmowanie decyzji
¹³⁴ **to take sth into consideration** | brać coś pod uwagę/rozważę
¹³⁵ **to consider** | rozważyć
¹³⁶ **to run sth** | kierować czymś, zarządzać
¹³⁷ **determined** | zdeterminowany
¹³⁸ **average** | przeciętny, średni
¹³⁹ **vs (versus)** | w przeciwieństwie, w porównaniu
¹⁴⁰ **to set sth up** | założyć coś
¹⁴¹ **to report** | informować, podać informacje
¹⁴² **additional** | dodatkowy

and failures (more so than men) and that their chances of achieving¹⁴³ success were at least equal to or greater than¹⁴⁴ those of men. Polish men acknowledged that they do have an (unfair) advantage¹⁴⁵ based on¹⁴⁶ their gender. What are the implications¹⁴⁷ of these findings for gender-based behaviours and customs in the workplace in Poland? Perhaps they reveal¹⁴⁸ that in spite of¹⁴⁹ inevitable¹⁵⁰ gender inequalities¹⁵¹ in business environments, women generally¹⁵² harbour no feelings of¹⁵³ bitterness¹⁵⁴ about them; in fact, Western foreigners who are doing business in Poland are likely to find equally self-confident¹⁵⁵, assertive and competent¹⁵⁶ women in the business environments they encounter¹⁵⁷ there. Therefore, they must be aware that any attempts¹⁵⁸ to facilitate¹⁵⁹ a perceived higher level of sexism in Poland will not be officially tolerated.

Although ultimately then, the refusal¹⁶⁰ to tolerate gender-based discrimination is very similar between Polish business environments and those in North America, a few pointed¹⁶¹ differences between the two cultures are worth mentioning¹⁶². Attitudes toward time are often more relaxed in Poland. That is, in Poland it sometimes

happens that a professional arrives¹⁶³ late for a meeting or even work and then excuses¹⁶⁴ his or her behaviour by explaining a transportation delay¹⁶⁵. If an employee did the same thing in North America, it would be grounds for¹⁶⁶ firing. Although workplace attitudes may be perceived as being more 'relaxed' or casual in North America than in Poland, lateness is quite a serious matter in Canada and the United States. "It's about respecting your team," says Roger Hladki, a senior manager at Broadview Enterprises¹⁶⁷ in Toronto, "if an employee – including myself – shows up¹⁶⁸ late repeatedly¹⁶⁹, it communicates to the people that he doesn't respect their time, that, in a way¹⁷⁰, he expects all of his co-workers to follow¹⁷¹ his schedule, and not that of the team, regardless of the excuse."

By and large¹⁷², office environments on both sides of the Atlantic display¹⁷³ more similarities than differences in the most important business behaviours, such as level of expected politeness¹⁷⁴ in meetings, mutual respect for both sexes and for people in positions of authority¹⁷⁵ and the maintenance¹⁷⁶ of a high degree of tact¹⁷⁷ with respect to extending¹⁷⁸ office relationships into

the personal realm¹⁷⁹. However, whether such norms in these two cultures are merging¹⁸⁰ or diverging¹⁸¹, as we increasingly¹⁸² negotiate transforming work environments, changing demographics¹⁸³ and changing work roles for some (between time spent working at home and that at the office), may be difficult to predict¹⁸⁴. "As we move into¹⁸⁵ an increasingly interconnected¹⁸⁶, yet individualized work world, with more and more people choosing or being able to work from home¹⁸⁷," says Michela, "we may find paying attention to¹⁸⁸ cultural differences in the way that we interact in supposedly formal environments, so as to facilitate dynamic interactions and mitigate¹⁸⁹ misunderstandings, to be a surprisingly important consideration. As more people adopt individualized work schedules and the boundaries¹⁹⁰ between professional and home environments blur¹⁹¹, they may find that they have to try a little harder to perceive that cultural differences across continents still exist¹⁹²; therefore, in spite of some cultural unity¹⁹³, we may still make a case for¹⁹⁴ the need to continue to be aware of some differences in norms." As for this writer, it'll be a while yet before he takes part in a teleconference in a three-piece suit¹⁹⁵. ■

- ¹⁴³ **to achieve** | osiągnąć
- ¹⁴⁴ **equal to or greater than** | równy lub większy od
- ¹⁴⁵ **to have an unfair advantage** | mieć nieuczciwą przewagę (nad kimś)
- ¹⁴⁶ **based on** | na podstawie, ze względu
- ¹⁴⁷ **implication** | konsekwencja, implikacja
- ¹⁴⁸ **to reveal** | ujawnić
- ¹⁴⁹ **in spite of** | pomimo, mimo
- ¹⁵⁰ **inevitable** | nieunikniony
- ¹⁵¹ **inequality** | nierówność
- ¹⁵² **generally** | ogólnie, na ogół
- ¹⁵³ **to harbour no X feelings/feelings of X** | nie mieć żadnych uprzedzeń/nie rościć pretensji (do kogoś o coś), nie mieć do kogoś (np. żalu)
- ¹⁵⁴ **bitterness** | gorycz, rozgoryczenie
- ¹⁵⁵ **self-confident** | pewien siebie
- ¹⁵⁶ **competent** | kompetentny, wykwalifikowany
- ¹⁵⁷ **to encounter** | napotkać, znaleźć
- ¹⁵⁸ **attempt** | próba, usiłowanie
- ¹⁵⁹ **to facilitate** | ułatwić, umożliwić

- ¹⁶⁰ **refusal** | odmowa
- ¹⁶¹ **pointed** | *tu*: subtelny
- ¹⁶² **worth mentioning** | warty wzmianki
- ¹⁶³ **to arrive** | przybyć
- ¹⁶⁴ **to excuse sth** | usprawiedliwiać coś
- ¹⁶⁵ **delay** | opóźnienie
- ¹⁶⁶ **grounds for doing sth** | przyczyna czegoś, powód (do) zrobienia czegoś
- ¹⁶⁷ **enterprise** | przedsiębiorstwo, przedsięwzięcie
- ¹⁶⁸ **to show up** | pojawiać się, zjawiać
- ¹⁶⁹ **repeatedly** | ciągle, wielokrotnie
- ¹⁷⁰ **in a way** | w pewien sposób, w pewnym sensie
- ¹⁷¹ **to follow sth** | przestrzegać czegoś
- ¹⁷² **by and large** | ogólnie rzecz biorąc, w sumie
- ¹⁷³ **to display** | okazywać, pokazywać
- ¹⁷⁴ **politeness** | uprzejmość
- ¹⁷⁵ **authority** | władza, autorytet
- ¹⁷⁶ **maintenance** | utrzymywanie
- ¹⁷⁷ **tact** | taktowność, wyczucie
- ¹⁷⁸ **to extend** | rozszerzać, powiększać
- ¹⁷⁹ **realm** | kraina, obszar

- ¹⁸⁰ **to merge** | mieszać się, łączyć
- ¹⁸¹ **to diverge** | oddzielać się, rozchodzić
- ¹⁸² **increasingly** | coraz bardziej, coraz częściej
- ¹⁸³ **demographics** | *tu*: przedziały wiekowe/ podziały społeczne
- ¹⁸⁴ **to predict** | przewidzieć
- ¹⁸⁵ **to move into sth** | przechodzić do czegoś/ dokądś
- ¹⁸⁶ **interconnected** | połączony, wzajemnie powiązany
- ¹⁸⁷ **to work from home** | pracować w/z domu
- ¹⁸⁸ **to pay attention to sth** | zwracać na coś uwagę
- ¹⁸⁹ **to mitigate** | zminimalizować, ograniczyć (zły wpływ czegoś)
- ¹⁹⁰ **boundary** | granica
- ¹⁹¹ **to blur** | mieszać się, zacierać
- ¹⁹² **to exist** | istnieć
- ¹⁹³ **unity** | jedność
- ¹⁹⁴ **to make a case for sth** | dowodzić czegoś, *tu*: przekonywać o słuszności/potrzebności czegoś
- ¹⁹⁵ **a three-piece suit** | garnitur trzyczęściowy