

Oman and United Arab Emirates a cultural briefing for businesses



Oman

The Sultanate of Oman occupies the south-eastern corner of the Arabian Peninsula with a population of around 2.5 million. It is one of the most relaxed and open Muslim states in the Gulf. The sexes are not strictly segregated, and western businesswomen sometimes feel more at ease there.

The Omani culture has its roots firmly in the Islamic religion. The majority of Omanis belong to the *Ibadhi* sect of Islam.

Since the slump in oil prices in 1998-99, Oman has made active plans to diversify its economy and is placing a greater emphasis on other areas of industry. These include natural gas, minerals, manufacturing, agriculture, fishing and tourism.



Above, national dress for Omani women

Though costumes vary from region to region, the main components of an Omani woman's outfit comprise a dress worn over trousers (*sirwal*) and a headdress, called the *lihaf*.

The national dress for Omani men is the *dishdasha*: an ankle-length, collarless gown with long sleeves. The *dishdasha* is generally white, though black, blue, brown and lilac can also be seen.



Above, national dress for Omani men

United Arab Emirates



Above, Abu Dhabi, the capital

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a federation of seven emirates or states: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm Al-Qaiwain, Ras Al-Khaimah and Fujairah. It has a population of just under 4 million. Though an Arab-Islamic country, you will find the UAE has one of the most liberal societies among all the Arab nations. People from all over the Arab world, Asia, Europe, Africa and the Americas converge here.

The official religion of the United Arab Emirates is Islam. But other faiths are tolerated and freedom of worship privately is given. Churches are common in some emirates and in Dubai you will even find a Hindu Temple.



Above, Dubai

Business culture and etiquette

Greetings:

- Several styles of greetings are used in Oman and the UAE, so it is best to wait for your counterpart to initiate the greeting.
 - Men shake hands with men.
 - Some men shake hands with women, however it is advisable for a business woman to wait for the man to offer his hand.
 - A more traditional greeting between men involves grasping each other's right hand, placing the left hand on the other's right shoulder and exchanging a kiss on each cheek.

Perception of time:

- People and relationships are more important than punctuality and precise scheduling.
- Schedules and deadlines tend to be quite flexible.
- Meetings may be interrupted frequently by phone calls and visits from friends and family.

Expressive business culture:

- Middle Easterners generally speak at much closer quarters than British people. Expect an interpersonal distance of half an arm's length or less. There may be a tendency to verbal exaggeration: speakers use exaggeration and overemphasis without being aware of it.
- Eye contact can be intense and constant.
- Be careful of giving insult through body language – the 'thumbs-up' gesture can be considered offensive by some.

Establishing relationships:

- Business in Oman and the UAE is built on the basis of a good relationship between both parties. It is important to invest time in getting to know your business partners at a personal level. Credibility is built through relationships and agreements are founded on trust.
- Compared with the UK, negotiations may seem slow and ritualistic. People are often reluctant to do business with strangers. Here are some tips to guide you through establishing business relationships:
 - Make initial contact indirectly through intermediaries.
 - In meetings, take plenty of time to build up trust before getting down to business. Note that the person who asks the most questions is often the least important. The decision maker is likely to be a silent observer.
 - Do not feel obliged to speak during periods of silence. Silence usually means 'possibly'.
 - It is important to maintain harmony and avoid conflict and confrontation during discussions. Negotiators tend to be sensitive to honour, 'saving face', dignity and self respect. It is important not to allow your host to 'lose face' (avoid, for example, contradicting your host in public).
 - Effective communication requires frequent face-to-face contact.

Language

- **Official language:** Arabic is the official language of Oman and the UAE, although English is widely spoken in business circles. Other languages spoken in the UAE are Hindi and Farsi.
- **Finding translators/interpreters:** in the UK, you can search for local, quality-assured providers on **BLIS Professionals** (www.blis.org.uk/professionals). Locally, translators and interpreters are readily available – the best place to enquire is at the British Embassy.

Tips for effective communication

1. Be clear and concise

- Less is more: use, short, simple sentences.
- Use active rather than passive voice.
- Don't use idioms, irony, jargon or dialect expressions.

2. Speak more slowly

- Communicate your message in bite-size chunks, and pause regularly...
- ...but maintain the natural rhythm and stress pattern.

3. Reinforce your message

- Maintain eye contact so your listener benefits from facial expression and lip movement.
- Help your audience understand by getting **LOUDER** on key words and using intonation to communicate meaning.
- Make clear, direct statements.
- 'Triangulate' your ideas: repeat them three times in slightly different ways.

4. Make presentations effective

- Adapt your message to the audience in advance.
- Use appropriate graphics and handouts to enhance communications.
- Send through materials in advance, if possible.
- Signpost your main points and summarise at the end.

5. Double-check understanding

- Yours and theirs! Jot down names, numbers and technicalities.
- Ask your audience to repeat key points or arrangements back to you.

6. Be open-minded

- Ask open-ended questions.
- Be objective and build on others' ideas.
- Listen to make sure you've understood accurately.
- Suspend judgement and don't reach conclusions too quickly.

Using an interpreter

- **Before the assignment:** firstly, define the type of interpretation required (whispering or simultaneous). Fully explain the goals and objectives of the meeting or presentation. If you are making a speech or presentation, let your interpreter have a copy of the text in advance. Explain any important or difficult concepts and points. If you are part of a group, make sure they understand that only one person should speak at a time.
- **At the assignment:** appreciate that interpretations may take much longer than the original speech. Speak clearly and slowly, and pause regularly – every minute; after a thought is complete; or after you have made a major point.
- **Make sure you avoid:** long or complex sentences; slang, jargon, or colloquial expressions; jokes and humorous stories (humour seldom travels well and risks creating misunderstanding or causing offence); and interrupting the interpreter (unless it is really necessary, this can be confusing and appear rude).

Religion

An essential part of doing business: never underestimate the influence of Islam and The Qur'an. The Qur'an is central to life in the UAE and Oman. It is interwoven with the culture and dominates government, legal courts, schools, businesses and social life.

Religious customs:

Friday is the Muslim Holy Day; workweeks may run from Saturday to Wednesday.

Be careful not to interrupt Muslims at **prayer**, a religious practice they may perform five times a day.

Do not eat or drink in front of Muslims during **Ramadan** as they are fasting.

Orthodox Muslims do not eat pork, drink alcohol, or discuss the female members of their family.

Social customs: some tips

Gifts: many Middle Easterners are exceedingly generous, and their hospitality is legendary. Never admire an item too intensely – it may be presented to you as a gift! When receiving gifts, it is customary not to open it in front of the giver. When offered a gift, it is impolite to refuse it.

Dining: if you are invited to dinner or lunch in a restaurant, it is customary that your Middle Eastern host pay for it. The host and his sons should be the last ones to start eating as a sign of respect to the guests. Women and men may be separated when they eat.

Left hand: do not use your left hand, particularly when eating: it is considered unclean in parts of the Middle East. Gesture and eat with your right hand. Do not offer items with your left hand or point at another person.

Shoes: are often removed before entering a building. Follow the lead of your host.

Signposting and resources

- **BLIS Professionals** (www.blis.org.uk/professionals) – an online, quality-assured database of translators, interpreters, language trainers and cultural consultants in your area. You can search for BLIS providers offering Arabic language services in the East Midlands.

Sources

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