

Japan - people, culture, language

A guide for businesses



The country

- **Japan today:** With a population of over 127 million and the second largest economy in the world, Japan has gone from a peak of growth in the 1990s to successive crises at the beginning of the twenty-first century but remains one of the strongest and most reliable economies, with strengths in HiTech, car manufacturing and shipbuilding.
- **Growth sectors:** IT and HiTech consumables, motor industry, biochemical instruments, Japan is known for high quality precision technology with world class brands such as Sony, Toyota and Panasonic.
- **Environment** Japan comprises four main islands of which the most important is Honshu in which are situated the major cities of Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto. The island Kyushu is in the South and Hokkaido in the North. Okinawa is also part of Japan. Japan has six chains of mountains with 77 officially designated active volcanoes, including its highest and most famous mountain, Mount Fuji. Japan is prone to



Mount Fuji (Fujisan) is Japan's highest mountain

The people, culture & heritage

- **Team spirit:** Japan is a network society, bound by rules and standards of behaviour. Conformity is expected and a Japanese proverb explains that 'a nail which sticks up must be hammered down.' 'He is a team player' is a highly paid compliment.
- **Collective:** Japan is a collective society hence Japanese people tend to do things together, this is especially the case in decision making, which is a time-consuming collective process called *nemawashi*. This process can be challenging to foreigners but when the Japanese are ready, things can move very fast.
- **Face:** Personal dignity, or *face*, is very important to the Japanese, so they work hard to save *face*, to give other's *face* and to avoid others losing *face*. It is therefore an indirect culture and you always need to read between the lines.
- **Samurai:** From 1600-1853 Japan was cut off from the rest of the world by the Tokugawa Shogunate, who were responsible for developing the Samurai culture. The American opening of Tokyo Bay in 1853 breached the ban but the Shogunate continued until 1867. The new dynasty under the Emperor Meiji in 1868, undertook the process of modernisation that culminated in its economic success today.

Business culture and etiquette

- **Meishi:** (Business cards). The presentation of the business card is an important ritual, which you should learn. You should offer your card with both hands and receive your counterparts' card with both hands, keeping the card at approximately chest level. It is acceptable to place a card on the table in front of you and this can be quite useful should you forget the name or title of the card bearer. You can respectfully place it in your wallet or at the back of your cardholding case. Under no circumstances should you write on, damage or hand back a card as this is considered rude. Try to have your business card printed in English and Japanese.
- **Group participation:** The Japanese believe that everyone who is involved needs to be at meetings so these tend to be quite large. The most senior person may say little or nothing, leaving the presentation and discussion to a junior member. To learn who is most the senior, watch who is served tea first! Seniority of seating is normal with the most senior furthest from the door.
- **Silence:** The Japanese are comfortable with periods of silence for reflection, If they fall silent, resist the urge to burst into speech. The Japanese also appreciate restraint in gesture, dress and tone of voice.
- **Relationships:** The Japanese like to get to know business partners over a period of time. Expect many meetings in which no business is discussed but in which your prospective partners get the feel of you. When the Japanese make agreements, it is for long term.
- **Hospitality:** This is your chance to get to know the Japanese and build a relationship with them. When offices close at about 7 pm, colleagues often go out to eat or drink together. Don't miss an opportunity to join them. Things normally stop around 9pm as people often have a one or two hour commute home. Always offer to reciprocate hospitality at the same level as you received it. Office gifts can be exchanged but don't open them. They won't open yours in your presence. Why not? So as not to lose *face*.

Did you know?

The Japanese learn the Roman alphabet at elementary school but may have difficulty with pronunciation although they are very good at reading and writing. In recent years the JET (Japan English Teacher) programme, has brought English speakers into schools and universities as Language Assistants which has helped alleviate this problem.



Language

- **Official language:** Japanese.
- **Finding translators/interpreters:** in the UK, you can find local, quality-assured providers by contacting the Regional Language Network. In Japan, translators and interpreters are readily available - the best place to enquire is at the British Embassy.

Basic Japanese phrases

The positive impression you will make by learning to speak a few basic Japanese phrases cannot be overestimated. Below are some commonly-used phrases:

	Japanese
Good morning	Ohayo gozaimasu
Good evening	Konbanwa
Goodbye	Sayonara
Yes/No	Hai /ie
Thank you very much	Domo arigato gozaimasu
Excuse me	Sumi masen
What is your name?	Anata-no namae wa?

Signposting and resources

International House is one of the world's largest language and cultural training organisations worldwide with nearly 150 centres in over 40 countries, specialising in modern languages and cross-cultural training. Contact Barry Tomalin at International House barry.tomalin@ihlondon.co.uk

Quotes

'Japanese are like the Germans on the surface and the Italians underneath. Italian business is more like diplomacy than commerce.'

British businessman

Using an interpreter

- **Before the assignment:** firstly, define the type of interpreting 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 interpreting may take much longer than the original speech (when interpreting from English to Japanese, the Japanese version is usually about twice as long). 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).

Food and drink

Japanese food has travelled worldwide. Sushi is now available in every city and other Japanese delicacies, such as sashimi (raw fish) and yakitori (barbecue) are increasingly popular. Japan's rice wine, sake, is also well-known and its lager beers, such as Asahi and Kirin, compete worldwide. Japanese food is served in sets, miso soup, salad, vegetables, meat or fish and rice. Different restaurants may be devoted to different types of food, such as a tempura restaurant, serving only food cooked in rice batter.

Festivals

As befits their love of nature and the Shinto religion, the Japanese celebrate the spring festival



and enjoy visiting the irises in the Meiji Shrine gardens in Tokyo and the cherry blossoms (Sakura) in Kyoto. Japan's biggest festival, Gion in Kyoto in July, celebrates deliverance from plague.

Sources

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