

# Canadian Workplace Culture

Are you an international student or a newcomer to Canada? Are you getting acquainted with the Canadian workplace culture? There are many kinds of rules in Canada that might differ from another society. This guide will take you through some Canadian workplace cultures that will help with the transition from one culture to another.

## Body language

Non-verbal communication is an important part of your first impression. The first hand shake you give to your interviewer, the first outfit you wear, the first contact you make with your boss. The initial interactions set a picture of who you are at a workplace.

## Personal space

In Canada, people value their personal space and rarely touch each other while meeting or chatting in the workplace (except for the initial handshake). It is customary to maintain approximately two feet (or an arm's length of space) between each other when chatting face to face. Being too close can seem invasive, and being too far away appears to indicate you are not interested in the other person.

## Eye contact

Maintaining eye contact during a conversation means respect. In a conversation, direct eye contact shows interest and attention. Individuals who avoid eye contact can sometimes be observed as unfriendly, untrustworthy or lacking in self-confidence. Note: Be careful not to stare or maintain unbroken eye contact for a long period of time.

## Shaking hands

A handshake is a common form of etiquette when first meeting an employer, co-worker or business partner. People often greet one another with a firm handshake that lasts two–three seconds. While shaking hands, it is polite to make eye contact and smile.

## Dress code

Depending on the type of job and company, the dress code may vary. In general, when attending an interview, it is best to dress more formally and conservatively. During the interview, ask the interviewer what the appropriate attire is for the job. For the most part, the common office dress code is business casual. Avoid wearing jeans, shorts or revealing clothes. Most companies discourage using perfume, cologne or any scented products due to allergies and sensitivities.



## Communications basics

### Greetings

When passing people (regardless of their position) in the hallways or arriving at work in the morning, it is courteous to say “hello” or “good morning” and make eye contact. At the end of the day, you can say “goodbye” or “have a good evening.”

### Personal names and forms of address

Canadian workplaces are generally quite casual. It is common to address coworkers and business associates by first name — even when chatting with a manager or supervisor. However, when introducing someone, use both their first and last names.

### Email, phone and computer use

Try to avoid using work email accounts and phone lines for personal reasons; they are intended to be for work purposes only. In addition to this, you should also avoid using personal emails when an issue is business related. Social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, are sometimes recognized as both professional and social tools. In general, if using Facebook and/or Twitter is within the job description, it wouldn't be an issue. However, for social use or to chat with friends, it is inappropriate. Check with your employer to confirm company policies.

### Socializing

Socializing and friendship are a normal part of workplace culture in Canada — in fact, they're encouraged. Some small talk or conversation is expected, and it demonstrates a caring attitude. However, pay attention to how other people interact in the work environment to determine what is normal and acceptable. Some topics to be careful with are religion, age and income.

Some acceptable socializing:

- Chatting over coffee and lunch breaks
- Chatting for a few minutes when arriving at work in the morning or leaving for the day
- Socializing while waiting for colleagues to arrive for a meeting

Some unacceptable socializing:

- Chatting extensively on the phone with friends and/or family while at work (some exceptions may apply)
- Engaging in a long conversation during office hours
- Gossiping or engaging in rumours about colleagues
- Using slang and foul language that could offend colleagues



## Asking questions

In some cultures nodding your head “yes” is a sign of respect, even when the individual you are talking to doesn’t understand the material or instruction. In Canada, supervisors and managers encourage employees to speak up when you don’t understand. If you do understand, try to paraphrase: “So, in other words, what you are saying is...” This shows that you fully understood the instructions. If you do not understand, ask! Asking questions of colleagues and immediate supervisors is one of the best ways a new employee can show their desire to learn and develop professionally.

## Other common etiquettes

### Teamwork

Teamwork is a very important aspect in Canadian workplace culture. Here’s how to demonstrate teamwork in your workplace:

- Treat everyone with respect. Greet someone working in an entry-level position with the same courtesy and enthusiasm as you would to an executive director.
- Do not interrupt others; it is considerate to give everyone time to share their thoughts.
- Show interest in people’s work, interests and achievements.
- Offer support when you see a co-worker under stress or falling behind.
- Try to put the needs of the team/organization before your own.

### Punctuality

Time is very important to the Canadian workplace. In the workplace, attendance and punctuality are both used to measure an employee’s performance. It is important to arrive on time for work or business appointments. When a meeting is set for 10:00 a.m., arrive a few minutes early so you are ready to start right at 10:00 a.m. Everyone is late from time to time, but it is courteous to call and let someone know if you are going to be late.

### Courtesy

When someone opens the door for you, it is expected to say “thank you” back to the individual. It is very important to display respect to everyone at all times. Start to make it a habit of using courtesy words such as “please,” “thank you” and “you’re welcome” when dealing with co-workers, managers and customers. Before entering an office, always knock as a sign of respect for other people’s workspace.

### Hierarchy

Although employees often work independently or in teams on day-to-day tasks, most Canadian companies operate in a hierarchical (or top-down) system, and employees are expected to follow their supervisor's directions. When making decisions, asking for information or dealing with problems, you will be expected to talk to the right person within your company based on their level of authority.



## Icebergs

People are like icebergs. Some personal characteristics are on the surface, and we know them immediately when we meet someone. However, some characteristics are beneath the surface and take time to learn by talking and spending time with people. In Canada, people are from all over the world with different cultures, languages and customs. Avoid assuming what you know about a person — everyone comes from different backgrounds, cultures and experiences!

## Additional resources

[Live&Learn: Unspoken office rules of etiquette that you should know](#)

[Workplace Culture](#)

[Royal Roads University: Canadian Workplace Culture](#)

[What is Canadian etiquette at work?](#)

