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Go-to-market 2024

Doing Business in Poland

Cultural Aspects
and Business Etiquette



From Fredrik Udd, Managing Partner, Explore Markets

When I carried out my first project in Poland in 2002, the country was very different. I worked at a paint factory in Włocławek, which had just been acquired by a multinational corporation. Poland – not an EU member back then, was making progress, but faced many challenges. The development level was lower, reforms were tough, unemployment was high, and infrastructure was poor.

Fast forward to 2024, and the Poland I see today is remarkably transformed. Major events like joining the EU in 2004, hosting EURO 2012, surviving the COVID-19 pandemic, and dealing with the impacts of Russia's invasion of Ukraine have all shaped the country. Poland now boasts dynamic development, stable economic growth, and a business environment that has evolved dramatically. Unemployment is at a record low, and there's a noticeable shift in mindset. Many young people have an international outlook, and some have returned to Poland after studying or working abroad. The lifestyle has changed with a focus on being active, and cities have become family-friendly with plenty of parks and biking paths.

Poland now boasts dynamic development, stable economic growth, and a business environment that has evolved dramatically.

Many of our international clients and friends are amazed when they visit Poland for the first time. They find modern cities and well-educated, motivated people. This realization highlighted the need for a comprehensive guide on Cultural Aspects and Business Etiquette in Poland, aimed at helping those looking to navigate the Polish business landscape. We hope this guide helps you understand and thrive in the Polish business environment. Enjoy reading, and feel free to reach out to discuss more about Poland's culture and business opportunities!



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Contents

ECONOMIC OUTLOOK 03

EU Accession and Poland
Future Growth Prospects

KEY ASPECTS OF POLISH BUSINESS CULTURE 04

Hierarchy, Decision Making
Process and Formality

WORK ETHICS AND VALUES 07

Punctuality and Building
Relationship and Trust

BUSINESS MEETING ETIQUETTE 09

Dress Code, Meeting and
Greeting, Gift-giving

NEGOTIATIONS 12

Long processes, Risk
Aversion

NETWORKING AND SOCIALIZING 14

Dining and Tips for
a Successful Dinner
Conversation

WOMEN AT WORK 01

Growing Role of Women
in Leadership Positions

ESSENTIALS 19

Working Hours, Holidays,
Education, Safety, etc.

ABOUT EXPLORE MARKETS 21

Who we Are and
How We Can Help You



Economic Outlook

Since joining the EU in 2004, Poland's economy has experienced significant growth. The country has emerged as a leader in economic development, narrowing the gap with Western Europe and increasing its industrial production. EU integration attracted substantial foreign investment, transforming Poland into a major export hub with a fivefold increase in export value. Poland's GDP per capita PPP is estimated to be 40% higher than had Poland not joined the EU.

Looking ahead, Poland's economic outlook is promising, driven by strong growth expectations in a positive political landscape. According to various analyses, including PKO Bank Polski, Poland is entering a period of solid economic growth based on continued export expansion, consumption recovery, and robust investment activity. The labor market will tighten further with record low unemployment and high, though moderating, wage growth. Inflation is expected to return to target and Poland's public finances, while under pressure from increased defense spending and energy transition costs, remain under control.

Poland's economic progress present a compelling environment for business expansion and investment.

Poland's GDP growth (% y/y)



Source: GUS (2003-2023); PKO Bank Polski (forecast 2024-2026)



Chapter 1

Key Aspects of The Polish Business Culture

Hierarchy, Decision Making
Process and Formality



Key Aspects of the Polish Business Culture

In Poland, business culture varies significantly depending on the sector. Industries such as manufacturing tend to adhere to more traditional values, emphasizing hierarchy, formal communication, and respect for established protocols. On the other hand, sectors like IT embody a more modern approach, characterized by flexibility, innovation, and a focus on collaboration rather than strict hierarchy. This article presents a general view of the Polish business culture that is rooted in a deep respect for tradition while embracing contemporary practices.

Hierarchy and Decision Making Process

Hierarchy plays a significant role in Polish business interactions, with a clear structure of authority and respect for seniority. Decision-making often follows a top-down approach, where directives from higher-ranking individuals are respected and implemented.

This doesn't mean that lower-level employees aren't valued; their input is often sought, but the final decision usually rests with senior management. There is a certain distance between people in managerial positions and their subordinates. Business negotiations are expected to be conducted with people of similar positions. It is worth noting, however, that this hierarchical style of work in Poland is characteristic of older people. Young workers increasingly prefer more informal relations in the work environment. It's worth noting that while this hierarchical approach remains prevalent among older generations, younger workers increasingly gravitate towards a more informal work environment.



Business Communication Style

In Poland, people are usually straightforward in their communication, but they also like to keep things diplomatic to maintain good relationships. So, it's important to be clear and direct when you talk, but also to respect others' opinions. Polish business people appreciate it when you give them detailed answers and provide thorough explanations to their questions.

Formality and Etiquette

In Polish business culture, formality is highly valued. From the way people dress to how they communicate, a level of formality is maintained, especially in initial meetings.

Formal Agreements and Written Contracts

In Poland, business etiquette values formal agreements and written contracts. Usually, business deals need to be documented and signed, but sometimes email confirmations are enough. It's a legal requirement to ensure clarity and enforceability if disputes arise. Polish law generally requires contracts to be in writing and signed to be binding. The contract signed in PDF format is not sufficient. It must be signed with a "qualified electronic signature."

Usually, without a signed formal agreement in writing, especially with a new partner with no previous experience, no action will be taken by a Polish business to deliver on their part of the agreement.



Chapter 2

Work Ethics and Values

Punctuality and Building
Relationship and Trust



Work Ethics and Values

In Poland, work ethics run deep within the culture. Poles are recognized for their hard work, dedication, and focus on producing top-notch results. However, this doesn't mean they overlook work-life balance. Poles highly value their time and prioritize maintaining a healthy balance between work and personal life. They adhere to official work hours and generally don't expect business activities to extend beyond these times unless there are extraordinary circumstances. Nevertheless, decision-makers, particularly business owners, might check emails after hours, sometimes even late into the night. As in many other countries, the trend towards remote work remains strong. Many Polish professionals still prefer the flexibility offered by remote work arrangements. Hybrid working models, combining both remote and in-office work, have become increasingly popular among businesses in Poland.

Time Perception and Punctuality

Time is highly regarded as a precious resource, and there's a strong emphasis on its efficient use. Being punctual for appointments and meetings is considered professional and respectful. Meetings are typically expected to start and end punctually, adhering strictly to the scheduled time slots.

Building Relationship and Trust

Building personal relationships is considered fundamental. While professionalism is valued, the development of trust and rapport is often prioritized. Business negotiations and partnerships are often preceded by informal meetings and social gatherings, where individuals have the opportunity to get to know each other on a personal level. Establishing a strong personal connection fosters trust and facilitates smoother business interactions. Trust is earned gradually through honesty, consistency, and the fulfilment of commitments.



Chapter 3

Business Meeting Etiquette

Dress Code, Meeting and Greeting, Gift-giving



Business Meeting Etiquette

In Poland, business gatherings typically uphold a formal atmosphere. Initial discussions, often light and casual, pave the way to establish rapport before tackling the core matters. Anticipate in-depth conversations and come equipped with all essential paperwork and information.

Dress Code

In formal gatherings in Poland, people typically dress up in sophisticated attire. Men usually wear suits with shirts and ties, or they opt for trousers paired with a shirt and blazer. Women often choose more formal dresses, trousers, or skirt outfits with blouses and jackets. In less formal settings, Polish professionals go for a more relaxed business look.

Larger companies in Poland often have a set dress code for their employees, emphasizing the importance of looking professional. Smaller firms may not have strict rules but still expect employees to dress appropriately for their roles.

Dressing professionally is seen as a sign of respect and seriousness about the business at hand. Overall, the key is to maintain a polished and professional appearance, avoiding overly casual or trendy clothing choices.

Meeting and Greeting

Regardless of whether the meeting with the prospective Polish partner is online or offline, confirm the details the day before the agreed date.

The first meeting is often an introductory one where partners present business opportunities. It's common for these initial talks to occur with individuals of lower rank, rather than the actual decision-makers. Before diving into the business discussion, there's often a brief chat about non-business topics.

Most Poles speak at least one foreign language well, with English being particularly popular.



You can opt to be introduced to your potential partner through a mutually respected intermediary, such as a consultant like **Explore Markets**, as Poles typically prefer conducting business with someone they know. Making the first contact in Polish often leads to more favorable results.

When meeting someone for the first time, a firm handshake, direct eye contact, and a polite greeting are standard.

It is customary for the person of higher rank or the host to initiate the handshake. If you are meeting with a prospective Polish partner, it's polite to wait for them to offer their hand first. If you are the host or hold a higher position, you should extend your hand first. In professional settings in Poland, the etiquette for handshakes between men and women is similar.

The exchange of business cards is still common practice, usually done at the beginning of the meeting. Make sure to prepare enough business cards for all meeting participants.

Gift-Giving Customs

Gift-giving is a common practice, typically done to express respect and build relationships. During a meeting with a new Polish partner, a small symbolic gift, e.g. a souvenir from your country will certainly be appreciated.

Many companies in Poland have strict policies regarding the acceptance of gifts from business partners. Employees are often required to report any gifts received and may be prohibited from accepting gifts above a certain value or frequency.

If you are invited to a Polish business partner's home, it's customary to bring a gift such as chocolates, a bottle of wine and flowers, if you meet a woman or there is a wife present.



Chapter 4

Negotiations

Risk Averssion



Negotiations

Poles are recognized for their direct communication style, prioritizing factual information over emotional appeals. They show thoroughness in negotiations, with decisions typically made after careful analysis and consideration. Managers are expected to be decisive and assertive, openly expressing their opinions. When asked for their opinion, Poles often focus on areas needing improvement rather than highlighting successes. Business in Poland requires patience, as negotiations are conducted slowly and not always according to the established agenda.

Risk Aversion

Risk aversion in business is a notable characteristic of the Polish business landscape. This tendency towards caution and conservatism can be attributed to various factors, including historical experiences, economic instability in the past, and cultural values that prioritize stability and security. Managers in Poland often approach decision-making with a focus on minimizing potential risks and ensuring long-term stability.

This can manifest in several ways:

- **Preference for proven solutions and practices:** Polish businesses may be hesitant to adopt new technologies or innovative approaches without substantial evidence of their effectiveness.
- **Reluctance to invest:** Especially in risky ventures or expansion opportunities, particularly in uncertain economic climates. This cautious approach helps safeguard against potential losses and ensures financial stability.
- **Emphasis on due diligence:** Before entering into business agreements or partnerships, Polish companies typically conduct thorough due diligence to assess potential risks and ensure that they are making informed decisions.
- **Focus on long-term relationships:** Companies prefer to establish trust and reliability with their partners and clients over time, rather than seeking quick gains. This approach not only enhances stability but also fosters a sense of loyalty and mutual support, which can be vital during challenging economic periods.



Chapter 5

Networking and Socialising

Dining and Tips for
a Successful Dinner Conversation



Networking and Socialising

During trade fairs and top business conferences, significant business dealings often take place during networking sessions that occur after the official events. These sessions provide a more relaxed atmosphere where attendees can engage more freely.

Social events serve as valuable occasions for networking, fostering relationships, and gaining insights into Polish counterparts in a more casual setting. Business dinners and social gatherings are particularly popular and offer excellent opportunities for making connections and discussing potential collaborations.

Dining

In restaurants, the bill is typically covered by the host, but it's worth offering to pay. Such a gesture will be well received, even though it may be rejected.

Discussing business matters during dinner is generally acceptable, especially if the dinner is part of a formal business meeting. Beer and wine are the most frequently consumed types of alcohol in Poland (Statista). While vodka holds cultural significance in Poland and may be offered as a gesture of hospitality, it's perfectly acceptable to decline it.

In Polish business culture, the emphasis is more on the camaraderie and relationship-building aspects of the dinner rather than the consumption of alcohol.



Topics for a Successful Dinner Conversation

Topics for a business dinner in Poland can range from professional to personal, as the goal is often to strengthen relationships. Here are some suitable topics you can explore:

- **Professional updates:** Discuss recent developments in your respective industries or organizations, such as new projects, innovations, or market trends.
- **Poland's economic progress:** Poles take pride in their rich history and the economic progress they have achieved through dedication and sacrifices. Bear in mind that Millennials in Poland represent the first generation born into a period of peace and stability in the country's recent history. They attribute their success to hard work, resilience, and determination, which have been integral to overcoming challenges and building a prosperous nation.
- **Sport:** Football is by far the most popular sport in Poland, with a strong domestic league (Ekstraklasa) and a passionate fan base. Discussing Polish tennis players like Iga Swiatek and Agnieszka Radwanska can be an excellent topic as well. Both players have achieved significant success on the international tennis circuit. Many business people are active and take up different sports, such as golf, running (also marathons and triathlons), skiing, or cycling.
- **Local culture:** Show interest in Polish culture. You can discuss local landmarks, cuisine, or customs. Ask for places to visit.
- **Current events:** Before coming to Poland do your homework and catch up with local current events. Discuss relevant events or news topics, keeping the conversation light and respectful.



Chapter 6

Women at Work

PwC "Women in Work Index 2024", women in leadership positions



Women at Work

Working women in Poland are more prevalent and influential in the professional sphere than many foreigners expect.

- The gender pay gap in Poland, measured at median earnings, is notably low at 4.5%, compared to the EU average of 12.7% (Eurostat).
- At 63%, the percentage of employed women in Poland is slightly below the EU28 average of 68%. This disparity is partly due to the lower retirement age for women in Poland, set at 60 years old.
- According to the PwC "Women in Work Index 2024," Poland ranks 6th, positioning it two places behind Sweden but higher than Denmark, Finland, and Norway. The "Women in Work Index" is a tool developed by PwC to assess and compare the progress of women in the workforce across different countries.

The proportion of women managers in Poland stands at 42.9%, one of the highest among OECD countries based on 2022 data, surpassing even the Scandinavian countries.

- The representation of women in the boards and supervisory boards of the 140 largest companies listed on the Warsaw Stock Exchange reached 18% in 2023 (significantly higher than for example in Scandinavian countries). The highest number of women could be found in the largest companies listed on the GPW, where the proportion of women in leadership positions reached 22.8% in the WIG20 index.
- Professional networks and support groups for women are thriving in Poland. These networks provide platforms for women to connect, share experiences, and support each other's professional growth.



Chapter 7

Essentials

Working Hours, Holidays,
Education, Safety, etc.

Photo by Artur Kowalczyk on Adobe Stock



Essentials

Working Hours and Holiday

Working hours in Poland are usually from 8:00 to 16:00. With no formal lunch break. A two-week annual holidays is usually taken in the summer months of June, July or August.

Education

Education is highly valued in Polish culture. Many Poles invest significantly in their education and skills development, seeing it as a pathway to better job opportunities and social status.

Safety

Poland is considered a safe country. The country has one of the lowest violent crime rates in Europe, with particularly low levels of vandalism and arson. Its homicide rate is also one of the lowest in the world.

Religion

The level of religiosity in Poland is generally high compared to many other European countries. Catholicism is the predominant religion in Poland, and a significant majority of Poles identify as Roman Catholic. Just over 60% of Poles display “religious commitment”, according to data released by Statistics Poland in 2023. But just 5.5% of them are “strongly committed” to their faith, while 23% are “moderately committed” and 33% are “weakly committed”.

Corruption

On the 2023 Corruption Perception Index, Poland is ranked 54th out of 180 countries, receiving a score of 47 on a scale from 0 to 100. While this score dropped from 60/100 in 2017, it suggests that Poland’s public sector remains moderately clean from corruption.



About Explore Markets

Who we Are and
How We Can Help You

On the photo: Katarzyna Udd and Fredrik Udd





About Explore Markets

Built on 20 years of experience, Explore Markets provides strategic solutions designed to empower businesses to expand internationally. We are proud to be a 100% privately owned and operated family company. We are focused on personalized service, long-term relationships, and a commitment to quality.

Focused on CEE and the Nordics, our services span: **Export Readiness Assessment, Market Prioritization and Research, Distributor Search, Company Establishment, Marketing & Sales, Supply Chain and Sourcing, and M&A.**

Explore Markets Academy equips businesses with skills needed to navigate the complexities of international business, while **Export Management Outsourcing** offers experienced professionals without the need of hiring additional staff.

With 20 years of expertise, Explore Markets empowers global expansion. Our services cover Market Research, Partner Search, Lead Generation & Sales, Sourcing, and M&A.



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Let's meet

Unlock the key to thriving in Poland.

BECOME A CLIENT

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