

Global village or tower of Babel?

The world has become a 'global village' we are told. Smartphones, the internet, email, video conferencing – they have all made it increasingly easy to contact people where we want, when we want and how we want. But what does that mean in terms of business? It means that companies are becoming increasingly international – it's just as easy to do business with a company in Europe, as it is to do business with a neighbour. This has led to the rise of the international conference, a meeting where delegates from all over the world can come to discuss topics as diverse as the latest scientific breakthroughs to multi-million dollar trade deals. It's easy to see the benefits of such multinational meetings, but have you thought about the downside?

There are huge cultural issues to consider. Before the conference starts, you might want to think about what to wear. While dress code varies from company to company, Americans tend to be relatively casual dressers. Not so the Italians, who consider clothing as a reflection of your social standing and relative success, as well as your competence as a businessperson. If you're not sure how to dress, it's probably a good idea to look fairly smart.

When you arrive at the conference, there is the problem of the greeting. In Japan, it is customary to bow. If you decide to bow, you should never put your hands in your pockets as this shows boredom or disinterest. However, the Japanese understand that Westerners are unused to bowing and may offer a handshake instead. But remember, make sure it's a firm handshake to show that you are interested and confident. To a Westerner, a weak handshake shows a weak character. Then there is punctuality to consider. In some African and Middle Eastern countries, arriving late for a meeting shows how important you are. However, in Northern Europe, arriving late is one thing you ought never to do. It's considered rude to keep your colleagues waiting.

So, are we living in a global village or the Tower of Babel? Global village of course, but you need to be aware of the pitfalls ...