

7. Written and unwritten rules in Europe

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This week I was visiting one of our companies in France. Again, I noticed how different it is doing business in other European countries. Even in Belgium, where employees are described as 'workers' and 'clerks'. Workers are the people operating the machines, clerks are the people in the office. Even the workers' and clerks' trade unions are separate. The first time I heard that, it seemed rather insulting. Surely our Dutch view is that everyone is equal? But that's the way it's done in Belgium.

The composition of a works council in Belgium is also different from the Netherlands. In Belgium, a works council consists not only of representatives of the employees, but also of delegates from senior management, with the employer as chairman. In the Netherlands, a works council consists solely of employees.

Belgium also has the option of temporary unemployment. Employers can make employees who are bound by a contract of employment temporarily unemployed for economic reasons. During that period, the employee can claim unemployment benefit. As soon as turnover picks up again, these employees can go back to work and their benefits stop.

In France, it's customary to shake hands with everyone when entering a room; a general 'good morning' is not enough. The people on the production lines also expect this, and it's a bit impolite not to do it. To us that sometimes seems like a waste of time. And if a CEO makes a suggestion to an employee, this is readily interpreted as an instruction which is carried out unthinkingly, even if it might not be a brilliant idea.

Doing business in France is quite complex. A customer who purchases more than 25% of a supplier's turnover cannot simply terminate a contract. Depending on how long a company has been doing business, the order will continue for at least a year after notice of termination. If the contract needs to be stopped sooner than that, payment must be made to settle potential dismissals. A company with more than 50 employees is also obliged to pay out a profit share to all employees.

German companies require a different approach. There the boss really is the boss, possibly just because of his position or background. Anyone who doesn't respect the boss will not go far. A salesperson must also show respect to a buyer in order to be successful. Anyone who turns up late or with unpolished shoes is not showing respect.

One notable thing is that hierarchy seems more important in non-Dutch countries than it does to us. We in the Netherlands are far more outspoken and far less likely to take offence if someone, regardless of their position, says they disagree with something. In such cases, the English will politely say that they find it very interesting, and will then do exactly what they intended to do anyway.

For a European company like Pooling Partners, it's not easy to remain constantly abreast of the various rules and all the unwritten customs. Local management that ensures that we are always aware of the local regulations is important. Especially if they know where the sensitive areas are and also manage to communicate that tactfully to foreign colleagues, that's vital!

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