



Living and Working in Mexico

By Anne Dean

For U.S. employers, its neighbor south of the border offers numerous opportunities. Dean shares her knowledge of business protocol and vast culture of the world's 13th largest nation.

Mexico holds fascination for nearly every taste with ancient ruins, snow-capped mountains, a tropical rain forest, unspoiled beaches, and volcanoes. Mexico is a land of mystery and wonderment providing endless adventure and intrigue.

Living in Mexico is an opportunity to experience a wide variety of traditions from Mexico's many regions. The local people take great pride in their customs and like to demonstrate them in a rich array of cultural events. Traditional arts and crafts can be viewed in festivals, regional fairs, or a multitude of local celebrations for which foreign nationals will be welcomed along with the local public. In addition, Mexico is a country of abundant beauty and diversity, with a diverse topography and climate.

The 13th largest country in the world, Mexico is home to approximately 100 million people. Regardless of age, the Mexican people are typically fun-loving and spiritual, and they find immense enjoyment in their celebrations. They organize many local, national, and regional festivals, and enjoy holidays and fiestas throughout the year. Foreign nationals likely will be welcomed into the celebration, and every attempt at participation should be exercised. Not attending these festivities when invited may unintentionally appear rude.

Spanish-speaking People

The national language of Mexico is Spanish. While Spanish is spoken almost everywhere, a number of indigenous languages are still spoken in rural areas. The government is making an effort to keep these languages alive as part of Mexico's cultural heritage. Even in these rural areas, however, Spanish is taught as the primary language. However, the demand for English classes in Mexico continues to rise, especially among those involved in business. At the same time, international executives who traditionally have communicated with their foreign associates in English are realizing the importance of speaking Spanish. Still, while living in Mexico, there will be a need to speak Spanish moderately well in order to accomplish most routine daily tasks.

In everyday dealings with people, there is a need to communicate in Spanish. Many people in Mexico speak English as a second language, so there should not be much difficulty communicating. Once mastering some degree of Spanish, it should be tried out with local friends and colleagues instead of having them struggle with English. Learning Spanish is not only a courteous gesture, but it also allows for more freedom, more acceptability, and greater access to Mexican nationals.

People often wonder if a Mexican can understand a Spaniard speaking Castilian Spanish; the answer is yes, with a slight bit of getting used to the way the other speaks. That is, there are many similarities and many differences, but rather more of the former. The two varieties are rather similar in their syntax (by and large), but

with more noticeable differences in the pronunciation. There are few grammatical differences, and the syntactic differences are fairly minor, as well.

As with any international assignment, an assignee will get as much out of their stay in Mexico as they put into it. Among other things, assignees should make it a point to learn the language, and something about the history and culture. Partaking in the hospitality of local associates and neighbors, visiting sites of interest in their new home area and beyond, and enjoying Mexico's lifestyle, may find them in a more relaxed environment than they may be accustomed.

Avoiding the Culture Gap

There are distinct cultural differences between Mexico and other countries. In spite of this, transferees to Mexico should find the cultural gap easier to overcome than in other regions since Mexicans are fairly accustomed to having foreign nationals living in their midst. In fact, Mexico is home to the largest North American expatriate community in the world, and offers numerous organizations in its larger cities that provide opportunities for foreigners to meet one another and participate in activities of mutual interest.

It does not take long to notice that in Mexico work and pleasure is not as clearly delineated as in other countries. People may seem to enjoy themselves more during work hours and may gather more frequently for enjoyment after work than what may be accustomed to in one's home country. After a period of time, invitations usually are made to the homes of co-workers. It is a good idea to take advantage of this opportunity, not only to get to know a co-worker better, but to get a better feel for the culture and native hospitality. When these invitations are accepted, it is probably a good idea to bring a small gift such as a bottle of wine or some chocolates as a token of appreciation.

It is considered bad manners to discuss business on more than a superficial level in mixed company or in a social setting. There are social occasions especially designed for business unless the host or hostess initiates the discussion. It is inappropriate to negotiate or debate until coffee or after-dinner drinks have been served. Guests at these gatherings would prefer to discuss family, culture, and personal history. As a general rule, an interest should be shown in the new colleagues by asking about their families on subsequent occasions.

It is perfectly acceptable, in fact essential, to arrive for social events about one hour late. Getting there sooner runs the risk of interrupting the host or hostess as they get ready. For business meetings, even in Mexico City, being late by five to 15 minutes or more usually is not a problem, but it is safer for the new employee or visitor to be on time, while not being surprised if others are not. Usually, the meeting will not begin in earnest until all attendees have arrived (or certainly, until all the decision-makers have shown up), and this may not correspond to the time listed in the agenda. Resist questioning the late ones for a reason; there is always a reason, but it is unimportant to know, and usually involves obligations with more important people.

Handshakes are an expected part of both business and social greetings. Eye contact during the introduction is important, for as long as the introduction is being made. The use of business cards is common, and, if possible, have the business card translated into Spanish on the reverse; but it is not essential. Be sure to put any advanced educational degrees and full title or position information on either side of the business card as this information, as well as your business affiliations, are very important to Mexicans.

Until otherwise notified, especially for business and most social situations between adults, dress is strictly business no matter the occasion, at work, in the restaurant, or on the street, for men and women. Good taste is everything, and should be reflected in the clothes one wears, as well as all aspects of the way one lives their life. Unlike other parts of Mexico where the heat sometimes makes formality uncomfortable, the temperate climate of Mexico City and the extreme climate of Monterrey do not hinder formality.

When attending a social engagement with Mexicans, it is wise to heed the following rules: Casual attire for men is a jacket with no tie; for women, pantsuits or skirts. Women tend to dress rather stylishly for even the most casual social gatherings. Tennis shoes are not acceptable for adults unless you are planning to exercise.

At meetings of peers, there can be open communication and sharing of ideas: meetings can, in fact, be information-sharing and decision-making forums where all individuals are expected to contribute. In these circumstances, discussions are usually vibrant, with many people engaged at once, and where questions are common and interruptions, even of presentations, can be expected.

In more formal, conservative organizations, meetings often are gatherings of non-peers, where decision-makers clearly have called the forum together in order to gather information from below, clarify goals, and express their vision. In these cases, individuals often do not share ideas and are not expected to contribute to mutual problem solving. Remember, because a personal relationship often is demonstrated through physicality in Latin cultures, the more physically close a Mexican colleague sits, typically, the better they are responding to the proposal on the table (pulling or sitting physically away generally is not an encouraging sign).

Communication Style

Mexicans usually are circumspect in communication styles, and will indicate thoughts in indirect ways. They will respect someone who comes to them with already established knowledge and experience, and will build relationships based on one's position in society and/or the organization. If you are worth knowing and doing business with, it may be more important than the details of your proposal, and the relationship may, in fact, be sustained, despite occasionally more attractive terms from other competitors. Nevertheless, details are important, and a carefully proposed, logically organized, and beautifully presented (good-looking charts, graphs, and hand-outs are appreciated) proposal is key. Bargaining is the essence of the negotiation, as a way to build trust: therefore, be reasonable, not over-compromised, as this shows weakness.

Business hours in Mexico are from 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. An extended lunch (from approximately 1:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.) is quite common, so many stores and offices close between these hours. Office hours may be extended until 7:00 p.m. or 8:00 p.m., and dinners start as late as 11:00 p.m. Banks typically are open from 9:00 a.m. to about 2:00 p.m., and government offices are open from 8:30 a.m. to about 2:00 p.m. or 2:30 p.m. from Monday to Friday.

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