

Business Etiquette in Germany

Germany is a highly individualistic country. Therefore, showing the highest respect to your partners in conversation is recommended, no matter if you are talking to a superior, an employee or a stranger in the street. It is as well recommended when communicating with someone who is not of the same gender or age as yourself. In a work related context, this means that you should expect business etiquette to be taken rather serious. Also unethical behavior will not be tolerated and might even ruin the chance of any further negotiations. Corporate responsibility regarding social issues as well as the environment, is valued highly in public and politically wanted. As a result, many companies are looking to become more „green“ and more socially responsible.

Germans like to plan well and in great detail. The thought process is very thorough. Focus is laid on achieving the task at hand. Failures and mistakes will be carefully analyzed. Expect there to be a lot of correspondence to back up and keep a record of decisions and all official communication. Protocol should be followed closely and in time. Surprises and sudden changes of plans are unwelcome.

Academic titles, background and achievements are of great interest to grant a persons thorough knowledge of the subject. Business relationships are mostly based on mutual advantage. Interpersonal relationships play an only secondary role. Business is about business. It is taken seriously. It is seen as polite and prove of your sincere interest if you have informed yourself about a companies culture, projects and areas of expertise before getting into contact. At a job interview, this will be expected and you might be specifically asked about it.

Germans might seem reserved at first. At the same time they are direct up to the point of bluntness. You do not need to be offended, since it is not usually meant in that way . Germans will also expect you to speak your mind. They will take you by your word rather than guess what you might be thinking instead. Especially when yes or no questions are being asked, there is no variation or reading between the lines. Clarity is appreciated and it is acceptable to give no for an answer, even if in certain contexts it should be accompanied by an acceptable explanation.

Since Germans like to strictly separate business from their private life, it might take some time to form meaningful personal relationships.

Punctuality

Germans manage their time carefully. Do not be late for a meeting, an appointment, or even when meeting in private. Especially if you are meeting with superiors. But also a superior should not be late in order to not come across as being rude.

If you can not avoid being late even if it is only by a few minutes, make sure to call and explain your situation. Germans are very punctual, and can easily be offended by a delay.

If you are late for a business meeting with more than one person, you should just enter the room and walk straight up to your seat without much ado or interruption. After the meeting, apologize to your boss and give an explanation for your delay.

Smalltalk

It is good to talk about something easy like the location of your meeting or the food if you are eating together. Everything you say should be rather positive. You should not choose topics like religion or politics for these are topics, that could cause more serious discussion or disagreement.

If you are at a convention or another social event, you may walk up to people or wait for a possibility to get close to them in a quiet moment and introduce yourself. People will be interested in your background, your company, your position and plans. It is polite to ask questions and keep a good eye contact to show your interest. To end a conversation politely, you can say that you now want to go and catch the chance of talking to someone else that you might have been waiting for already. Still more elegantly you can introduce the person to someone else who fits well for her or him to talk to and then leave after a little while. It is common to exchange business cards.

Polite Form of Address

In Germany, there are two ways of addressing someone. The informal "Du" is used amongst friends and family but more and more also in public everyday life. Especially in bigger cities you might be addressed by a waitress, a salesclerk or just someone in the street asking for directions using "Du". It is also common to address strangers that have approximately your own age or people you consider to belong to a similar social group (for example "university students", "parents of small children", etc. ...) by using "Du".

Nevertheless, the formal "Sie" is still very common in general. It is used to address anyone you are not at least acquainted with from late adolescence on.

In the business environment, it is still mandatory in many cases. The larger and older the company and the more conservative the line of business, the more likely "Sie" will be the most commonly used form of address.

The informal "Du" can only be offered by the higher ranking person. If rank is equal, it is usually the older person who offers. If your boss however did offer to use "Du" but while having been drunk, for example at a Christmas staff party, you should wait and see if he will choose to remember it at the next day of work.

Names and Titles

Double names should not be shortened (Frau Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger).

Titles are generally being included when addressing someone or referring to people, unless the person in question wishes otherwise:

-Academic titles (not below PhD) in front of the family name (Herr Dr. Müller).

- If someone is holding a public office ("Frau Ministerin", "Herr Minister") - their spouses are not included but being addressed using their own name and proper titles.

-Titles of nobility are used without "Herr" and "Frau" also without "zu" if this is part of the name. The title itself as well as "von" are to be included: (Baron zu Lippe --> "Guten Tag, Baron Lippe!" . Baronin von Schorlemer --> Guten Tag, Baronin von Schorlemer!" academic titles are additionally included: Guten Tag, Dr. Baronin von Engelhardt).

Make sure to also use the correct titles and address when corresponding by mail or letter.

When meeting...

- in private, either the person who arrives last or whoever sees the other one first is the first to greet.

- in the business context, it should also be the person entering the room, but it is the person higher in rank who first extends a hand for the formal greeting (handshake). If no one enters, the process is strictly regulated by hierarchy: It is always the person lowest in rank who greets the others first starting with the person that holds the highest ranking position. After that the person greeting should address the person next highest in rank and so on. If the ranking within a group is unknown, the person greeting should address everyone as a group or work their way through clockwise or counterclockwise. In meetings however, people who know each other exchange greetings before. Again the lowest ranking starts with the introduction of anyone in her or his company. Then anyone higher in rank follows according to the hierarchical order. Now that everyone has been introduced, brief handshakes with eye contact are being exchanged.

Business Cards

If in a meeting, visitors give their business card first to the person highest in rank. If the hierarchical order is unclear, the cards are being handed out clockwise or counterclockwise starting with the person standing next to the visitor.

If you meet in a neutral place, for example at a convention, it is, however, the person highest in rank who should offer a card first.

Cards should always be read. It would be an offense to put a card in your pocket without looking at it.

Gift giving

In business context, gift giving is not common in Germany and also not usually expected. For more social occasions, gift giving is relatively customary.

- A visitor thinking of giving a gift should choose one that is small and of good quality, but not overly expensive.
- Acceptable gifts at business meetings are items of office equipment, good quality pens with your company's logo or liquor.
- When invited to a German home, it is appropriate to bring a gift of flowers, wine, chocolates, or a small gift that represents your country or region.
- Flowers should be given in uneven numbers and unwrapped (unless wrapped in cellophane). Avoid presenting 13 of any kind of flower or red roses. However, this rule does not apply to bouquets arranged/wrapped by a florist.
(Do not give red roses as they symbolize romantic intentions. Do not give carnations as they symbolize mourning. Do not give lilies or chrysanthemums as they are used at funerals).
- Gifts are usually opened when received.

Meetings

are arranged approximately two weeks beforehand. Holiday seasons are around Christmas, Easter and in summer.

Make sure to communicate who you are. This is done best by including a signature with your job position, contact information and e-mail during your correspondence beforehand.

Since hierarchy has a great influence on office communication, your partners will want to know what your position is relative to their own. (Please take a look again at the section meeting.... to remember the proper etiquette at the beginning of the meeting).

Make sure to be well prepared, especially if you know you will be presenting in a meeting. Your subject should be easy to understand and to the point. At the end of a meeting there are expected to be results.

If you want to convince the group of what you have to offer, it helps to try and convince the person highest in rank first. It makes it way more likely for the others to follow your opinion in the end.

Decisions often times already have been made in advance in informal meetings. They then only are officially confirmed in a meeting.

Using the Phone

The person calling greets and gives her or his name in first person unless the call takes place in a public area. If you answer your phone, give your last name or first and last name. In public places, names should be avoided in case of unwanted listeners.

You should choose a discreet type of ring tone or keep your phone on vibrate, especially in meetings. It is impolite to answer the phone during important conversations like for example a job interview. For such occasions, you should turn it to silent mode. Do not call people on business matters in their free time unless it is an emergency. If you are the caller, always ask at the beginning of the conversation if it is convenient to talk at the moment. Do not call a residence earlier than at around 10 am or later then at around 10.00. The usual office hours are approximately 8.00 or 9.00 am to 5.00 pm Monday through Thursday, on Fridays people might be leaving as early as 4.00 pm for the majority of companies. There are of course other examples.

Gender - Roles and Rules

In Germany it is still a lot harder for a women to achieve the same as an equally qualified man in the business world. Equal payment for equal work is a politically wanted goal but by far not yet accomplished. Nevertheless, there are a lot of areas in which men and women are being treated more and more equal.

Other than in private, in the business context it is the subordinate who usually offers gestures of courtesy like for example holding a door open. A man can offer it if he chooses, but so can a woman. These gestures should not be turned down.

It is also common for a women to pay the bill at a restaurant if she was the one to offer the invitation.

To succeed in getting a high profile job, a lot of the time, women have to adapt to the rules of the still mostly male dominated competitive environments within the higher ranks of large companies. Women oftentimes have to prove their abilities quickly in order to conduct business successfully. This issue is being addressed continuously in politics. For years we have seen a debate about the need for a law that would regulate the percentage of women a company has to employ in management and senior management. In 2016, finally a law was passed. It states that at least 30 % of the members on the board of directors of any large company that is listed on the stock exchange should be women. However, it does not apply to the rest of the management positions, which are being occupied mostly by men. The total amount of women in management positions in Germany is about 22 % This makes the country come in on the 9th position in comparison to all other EU-countries (according to European Commission).

Open Doors Policy...

is not common in Germany. Privacy is valued highly. It should not keep you from knocking at a closed door though. If it is convenient you will be welcomed in. To enter without knocking would be impolite.

Complimenting

Business is being done in a matter of fact kind of manner. There is no need to overly compliment each other to close a deal. Business partners do not feel the need to establish a deeper personal relationship before entering into an agreement.

When complimenting someone, be sure to praise their work, their achievements, positive traits of character or talents.

Remarks on looks, figure and such, no matter if positive or negative, can be perceived as sexist, immoral or aggressive. This might lead to serious consequences including lawsuits. Especially if talking to subordinate employees this should be avoided at all means .

Riding in the same Car/Cab

You should always choose the seat besides the driver unless it is already taken, or you are riding in a cab. It would be rude to sit in the back.

If you are taking a cab, the paying person sits in front or behind the driver. The guest sits on the right side in the back which is the safest and most comfortable seat for getting in or out off the car.

Dress Code

When you prepare for a meeting, make sure to meet the dress code in German offices. To be save, rather err on the more formal side. This applies especially in all conservative lines of business, like finance or insurance.

-Men wear a dark suit with a white or light-blue shirt and a tasteful tie.

-Women can wear a pantsuit or a blazer/skirt combination in black, navy, or beige, with a simple blouse or elegant shirt. Do not wear tight or revealing clothing.

-Both genders should avoid ostentatious jewelry, as well as visible tattoos or piercings.

-Choose neat, clean clothing.

-Shoes should never look worn down. Women wear closed pumps with lower heels in black, dark blue, brown, or beige.

This dress code doesn't generally apply to German business etiquette. There is a wide variation of rules according to the many different lines of work and companies. Still it is expected to meet the standard in question. Knowing what is appropriate to the occasion will speak for you. Not knowing about it will out you as an outsider.

For further detailed information on formal dressing you may look at this link:

<http://www.knigge.de/themen/kleidung/dresscode-einmaleins-5252.htm>

Recently there has been a development towards less formal conduct in certain fields and especially in small or only recently founded companies with mostly young staff members. You will probably find a lot less formality when looking at a young start up or small creative company then when looking at a huge older company in a more conservative line of business like a bank or one of the big car manufacturers. But maybe you will notice after a while how almost everyone working in graphics might not be wearing a suit but the same type of glasses.

However, this development does not apply to all of the rules. A smaller company might be structured less hierarchically, people might use the informal way to address each other, the dress code might be less conservative, meetings might be structured less formal... but you should still keep in mind to not let people wait, to show them respect according to the situation and the status they hold, and to consider that careful planning ahead is most likely expected. Also you will still be expected to know your subject well .

It is advisable to inform yourself about the company and its culture beforehand if you are going to meet with potential new employers or business partners for the first time. Make sure your own appearance and conduct suits the occasion. It is seen as polite and prove of your sincere interest if you have informed yourself about a companies culture, projects and areas of expertise before getting in contact.

Formal Business Dining

The business meal is usually set at a restaurant, mostly for lunch or dinner, more rarely for breakfast. Spouses are not included.

Upon arriving, you should remain standing until you are invited to sit. It is possible that a specific seat will be assigned to you. During the meal, do not talk about business unless your host suggests it. The bill is payed discretely by the host, male or female, at the desk, not at the table. Germans do not tend to stay too long after eating.

Aperitif and other Beverages

You should wait for the host to start drinking. Also avoid having too much alcohol. If drinks are being offered before eating, do not take your glass to the table. A waiter or waitress will take care of that. If glasses are already set at the table use them left to right. Beverages are poured only up to one third of a glasses volume. Hold the glass at its stem if it has one.

Cutlery

Knives, forks and spoons, if there are more than one of each, are being used from the outside inwards. Spoons are sometimes set above the plate rather than beside it. Knife and fork are being used for most foods. In a formal setting even for foods like pizza or sandwiches. Only cut the next bite you are going to take. Do not cut soft foods like potatoes . Whatever does not need a knife, should not be touched by it unless for pushing the food on the fork.

At the start of the meal, pick up the fork with your left hand, the knife with your right. Keep holding them during the whole time, only put them down to drink or use your napkin or if during courses plates, forks and knives are being switched. If you have to put them down, put them on your plate without touching the table. To indicate you intend to eat more, put your knife and fork on your plate forming a cross with the fork on top. To signalize you are done eating, lay them down side by side when finished, pointing at the center of the plate at the 5.25 position

It is impolite to leave food on the plate.

Napkins...

are being unfolded, then folded once and placed on your lap, before looking at the menu.

Use them if necessary and put them back in your lap. When getting up during the meal or after finishing, place them (used or unused) besides your plate at the left hand side. Also if they are made of paper. The same gesture is used by the host to signal it is time to end the meal.

Beginning

Let the host order first. If the host does not offer to order for you, order something similar in pricing and elaborateness. If it seems fit, you can also suggest to order a menu. You should then, however, ask for your hosts preferences- whether a starter or wine should be served and so on.. The host will then let the guests order.

Don't drink before the host invites you to. „Guten Appetit“ is rarely being used any more. Rather wish for a nice evening instead to start off. To toast nod at each other while maintaining eye contact. This is more elegant than clinking glasses. If you do so watch out not to cross with two other people toasting at the same time. This means bad luck.

"Couvert-Brot" / Bread in a Basket...

is a side dish to the starter, not a starter itself. It is being broken, not cut. Apply any spread or topping bite by bite.

Soup

Do not blow at it to cool down, do not dip your bread. The spoon is being used tip first. The plate is not to be tipped, even when it is almost empty. You may drink the rest of the soup only if it was served in a cup, you already ate all of the solid content and if it is a bouillon.

Salad

is eaten using the fork only. It is never cut. If it is too hard, helping along using a piece of bread is acceptable.

Spaghetti

Are also being eaten using only a fork. They should never be cut. If you absolutely have to you may use a spoon with the fork.

Asparagus

is placed on the plate with the tip facing left. It is always eaten starting at the tip.

Buffet Menu

It is acceptable to go as many times as you like but not to overload your plate.

Finger Food

Artichokes, oysters, prawns, mussels, spareribs, quails as well as poultry are allowed to be eaten using the hands but only if absolutely necessary. In a formal setting a finger bowl will be brought to the table in such cases. If there is no bowl, you should try and use fork and knife.

Espresso and any other hot Beverages after eating...

will only be served after everything else has been cleared away.

Make-Up...

is not being used at the table but in private at the restrooms.

“Malheur”

In case something gets spilled, it is no big deal. Ask the waiter to help. Go to the restroom and clean yourself. If someone else is involved apologize and offer to pay for the cost of the cleaning.

If a napkin or fork falls to the floor, ask for a new one. Do not pick it back up. If you can, avoid food that is hard to eat like lobster, unless you are an expert at eating it.

In Case of Doubt...

look to your host and neighbors. Whatever they are doing is most probably appropriate for the occasion.

Body Language

Use of space and touching

The use of space and what it will tell about the relationship between interacting people varies greatly between different cultures. In a cultural diverse setting, this can lead to misunderstandings and uncomfortable feelings.

For Germany and most of Central Europe the use of space that most people will feel comfortable with is as follows:

The *intimate space* forms a circle of approximately 50 to 60 cm around a person. At the sides it is slightly more narrow. Within this zone only intimate partners and people that are really close friends or relatives are welcome. But even those people might need a specific permission at times.

The *personal space* reaches from 50 or 60 cm around a person to about 1,5 meters. It is reserved for people we feel comfortable with like good friends, relatives or close colleagues.

The *social distance* is the distance we choose when talking to an acquaintance. The distance will be the closer the better we know the person. It extends from approximately 1,5 to 4 meters.

The *Public Distance* begins at about 4 meters around a person. This distance is chosen when addressing strangers, or in a public speaking situation.

If we cannot avoid the invasion of our personal or even intimate space (like for example in an elevator) we tend to also avoid all kind of communication. we will use strategies like focusing on a distant point or staring at the door until it opens. This is a way of protecting ourselves against the stress that the situation puts on us. If our personal or intimate space is being invaded without our permission, stress hormones are being released that will give our body the impulse to either flee or engage in combat. Since this behavior is socially not acceptable in most situations, we suffer from stress and uncomfortable feelings that we will seek to avoid. We will most probably dislike someone who invades our personal or intimate

space without our permission, especially if it happens repeatedly.

Here is a typical example for a complication when someone from Germany or even England meets someone from a culture with closer personal distances like Puerto Rico: The person from Puerto Rico will come up closer to the person from Germany or England than this person will feel comfortable with during conversation. The person from Europe will then suffer from stress and try to take a step or two backwards. Now in turn, the person from Puerto Rico will feel uncomfortable because the chosen distance will feel too great. Also it might make the impression that the person from Europe is not being very polite. So the person from Puerto Rico will take another step forwards and so on. This process will most probably feel uncomfortable for both sides. Even if it happens more or less unconsciously.

When it comes to touching, there are also huge differences. In Germany touching is common between people that are intimate partners, close friends or family. Within the workplace, it is rather unusual, but there is the formal use of the handshake. A handshake should be brief but firm. The persons shaking hands look at each other. At times, the handshake is accompanied by an additional nod.

This is an interesting video to watch on the differences when shaking hands:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N3zM23Hd7lo>

Other forms of touching like putting a hand on someones shoulder, arm or on top of a hand that is being shaken can either be a sign of closeness between the persons involved or a means of competition. These forms of touching happen only occasionally.

A person from England will most likely find touching to by no means acceptable. In France it is common to touch someone during conversation for example on an arm or shoulder. This regularly happens even in the office space without implicating anything out of the ordinary.

Eye Contact

In Germany as in most western countries, eye contact is extremely important. In these countries, it is polite to look at your partners in conversation during speaking to them. It shows interest, attention and openness. It builds trust and underlines the speakers self confidence, which is considered a good quality.

If a speaker does not look at the person he is talking to, he might in many cases be considered rude, shy or to be distracted.

To make eye contact, look directly into the other persons' eyes for 4-5 seconds. Then look at something else again and back again. It would also be considered strange to stare at someone for a long time without looking away briefly in between.

(Of course there are exceptions to these rules, depending on the situation. If you are for example the driver of the car you are traveling in, nobody will be irritated if you keep your eyes on the road).

In other cultures, eye contact is often looked upon in a different way:

In Asian, African, and Latin American cultures, extended eye contact can be considered an offense.

In Japan, even brief eye contact is uncomfortable for most of the people.

In many Middle Eastern cultures, an intense eye contact is common between the same genders as a sign of trust and sincerity.

Between opposite genders, especially in Muslim cultures, a more than brief eye contact is considered inappropriate and can cause serious complications.

Gestures and Mimic

Gestures and facial expressions are being used commonly.

In Germany, gestures using the space between the height of your own chest and the hip are considered fit to a normal conversation or presentation. Gestures higher than that will be read as "loud" gestures and a sign of unusual agitation.

Gestures with your palm facing up are perceived as open and inviting, or sharing. Palms facing down signalize more force and should be used carefully. Pointing a finger at someone is considered rude.

Smiling is good but should not be overused. If overused, it will be read as a sign of insecurity.

Openly showing disgust or strong dislike against another person by facial expressions, sounds or gestures is considered rude.

Specific gestures might have several meanings across different cultures.

To see some examples you may look at the following link:

<http://www.ikkompetenz.thueringen.de/selbsttest/offenheit/Gestik1L.html>

Nonverbal traits in the manner of speaking

When we speak, we do not only communicate through the words we are using but we also use nonverbal forms of expression like vocal volume, speed of talking, and variation in pitch of voice.

For example to a person traveling from Germany to Morocco, it might seem as if people were fighting a lot amongst themselves because the normal manner of speaking is more loud, more agitated, and people stand closer to each other than Germans normally would in an everyday conversation.

Or a person from India holding a presentation might be considered aggressive and hard to understand by someone from the USA or also from Germany, because the speed of speech could be very fast and rhythmic in comparison to what people from those countries might be used to.

Or a German Person might be considered emotionally cold by someone from Russia or an English speaking person, because the variation in the pitch of voice is only very slight compared to the normal range in Russian or English.

Taken into account, these differences become conscious and we are able to understand in another way why some people or even we ourselves react in the way that we do to nonverbal forms of communication that we are not used to.

