

Business etiquette, language & culture

Language

The Malaysian language (Bahasa Melayu, or Standard Malay) is an Austronesian language spoken by about 18 million people in Malaysia, Singapore, southern Thailand, Indonesia and Brunei. The name Standard Malay refers specifically to the language of Malaysia, although there are also about 170 million people who speak Bahasa Indonesia, which is a form of Malay.

Officially, the language of business is Bahasa Melayu, but English is widely spoken and commonly used. However, even if your contacts can speak some English, do not assume they will understand all you say. If in English, your presentations should be concise, clear and use easy-to-understand language. If in Malay, do not use an internet translation site. You should hire the services of a good interpreter. For translation, please contact AST Language Services. Visit the website at: www.astlanguage.com

Malaysian culture

Malaysia is a multi-cultural society. Its main ethnic groups are Malays, Chinese and Indians. However, despite being a very diverse, welcoming society, Malaysia remains a fairly conservative and conformist country, valuing respect and deference to authority. Behaviour that departs from established norms is avoided. Society is hierarchical, the family is the centre of the social structure and children are brought up to respect parents and elders at the top. When Malaysians meet someone for the first time, they may ask several personal questions to establish where they fit within the hierarchy. This may seem intrusive to a westerner, but is not intended to be rude. However, despite being hierarchical, in business teamwork and collaboration are encouraged, and all members of the organisation are valued.

General etiquette

Cultural norms for Chinese, Indians and Malays living in Malaysia do vary, and you should be aware of the different nuances in behaviour when working with those of a different background. However, all Malaysians place great importance on courtesy and being non-confrontational. It's difficult for most Malaysians to criticise or give a direct 'yes/no' response to difficult questions, so you should try to avoid putting them in an awkward situation. Avoid raising your voice, angering or insulting others as these can cause loss of face, and can result in them thinking disrespectfully of you. It is therefore best to avoid all public displays of emotion. However, Malaysians are very relaxed and have an easy going, welcoming attitude.

Meeting and greeting

Handshakes are the normal form of greeting, although some Malay women may not shake hands with men. If in doubt, wait to see if the woman extends her hand first. If not, then a slight bow of the head with your hand on your heart is normal. In a team, the most senior are always introduced first.

Business etiquette

Meetings should be arranged well in advance and confirmed the day beforehand, but best to avoid Fridays as this is a day of prayer for Muslims. A letter of introduction is often a good way to guarantee a meeting. The Chinese are likely to be punctual, but Malays and Indians may arrive a little late. Do not get frustrated if this is the case, as it is perfectly normal, and Malaysians expect signs of good etiquette. You should arrive on time as this shows respect for your hosts.

Business relationships develop slowly in Malaysia, as Malaysians will want to get to know you well, so it can take many meetings over months or even years to forge a successful partnership – a one-off visit, or merely video conferencing – will not be sufficient.

Being a hierarchical society, issues may need extensive discussion at all levels – often over drinks, lunch or dinner – before final decisions are made by senior management. Indeed the purpose of the discussions will not be so much about business as about deepening the relationship.

Business cards

Your business cards should be printed in Malay on one side. Hand them face-up and with both hands, and offer to the person with the highest social status first. Receive cards with both hands and study before keeping, ideally making a polite comment. Do not write on them or put in a back pocket!

Presentations

Presentations should be factual and easy to understand, including facts and figures to back up your conclusions. Avoid making exaggerated claims – Malaysians prefer to conduct business with people who are honest and do not brag about their accomplishments or financial achievements. Always avoid confrontational behaviour and high-pressure sales tactics. Make use of an official interpreter if appropriate, and do not assume all attendees will necessarily have a good command of English.

Interpreters

Communication styles are sensitive and courteous, with care being taken not to offend. Straightforwardness is valued in Malaysia and English widely understood. However, there may be times when you require an interpreter. For translation, please contact AST Language Services. Visit the website at: www.astlanguage.com

Malaysia public holidays 2017

Date:

Day:

Holiday:

Area notes:

10th February

Friday

Thaipusam

Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, Johor, Negeri Sembilan, Perak, Penang & Selangor

4th March

Saturday

Anniversary of Installation of Sultan of Terengganu

Terengganu

23rd March

Thursday

Sultan of Johor's birthday

Johor

14th April

Friday

Easter - Good Friday

Sabah & Sarawak

15th April

Saturday

Declaration of Malacca as a historical city

Malacca

24th April

Monday

Isra & Mi'raj

Kedah, Negeri Sembilan & Perlis

26th April

Wednesday

Sultan of Terengganu's birthday

Terengganu

1st May

Monday

Labour Day

National

7th May

Sunday

Hari Hol Pahang

Pahang

10th May

Wednesday

Wesak Day

National

17th May

Wednesday

Raja Perlis' birthday

Perlis

27th May

Saturday

Awal Ramadan

Johor, Kedah & Malacca

30th May

Tuesday

Harvest Festival

Sabah & Labuan

31st May

Wednesday

Harvest Festival

Sabah & Labuan

1st June

Thursday

Hari Gawai

Sarawak

2nd June

Friday

Hari Gawai

Sarawak

3rd June

Saturday

Agong's birthday

National

12th June

Monday

Nuzul Al-Quran

Kelantan, Kuala Lumpur, Labuan, Pahang, Perak, Perlis, Penang, Putrajaya, Selangor & Terengganu

26th June

Monday

Hari Raya Aidilfitri

National

27th June

Tuesday

Hari Raya Aidifitri

National

7th July

Friday

Georgetown World Heritage City Day

Penang

8th July

Saturday

Penang Governor's birthday

Penang

22nd July

Saturday

Sarawak's Independence

Sarawak

31st August

Thursday

National Day / Merdeka Day

National

1st September

Friday

Hari Raya Haji

National

2nd September

Saturday

Hari Raya Haji

Kedah, Kelantan, Perlis & Terengganu

9th September

Saturday

Sarawak Governor's birthday

Sarawak

16th September

Saturday

Malaysia Day

National

22nd September

Friday

Awal Muharram

National

7th October

Saturday

Sabah Governor's birthday

Sabah

13th October

Friday

Malacca Governor's birthday

Malacca

19th October

Thursday

Deepavali

National (except Sarawak)

24th October

Tuesday

Sultan of Pahang's birthday

Pahang

26th October

Thursday

Hari Hol Almarhum Sultan Iskandar

Johor

3rd November

Friday

Sultan of Perak's birthday

Perak

11th November

Saturday

Sultan of Kelantan's birthday

Kelantan

12th November

Sunday

Sultan of Kelantan's birthday

Kelantan

1st December

Friday

Prophet Muhammad's birthday

National

11th December

Monday

Sultan of Selangor's birthday

Selangor

25th December

Monday

Christmas

National

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