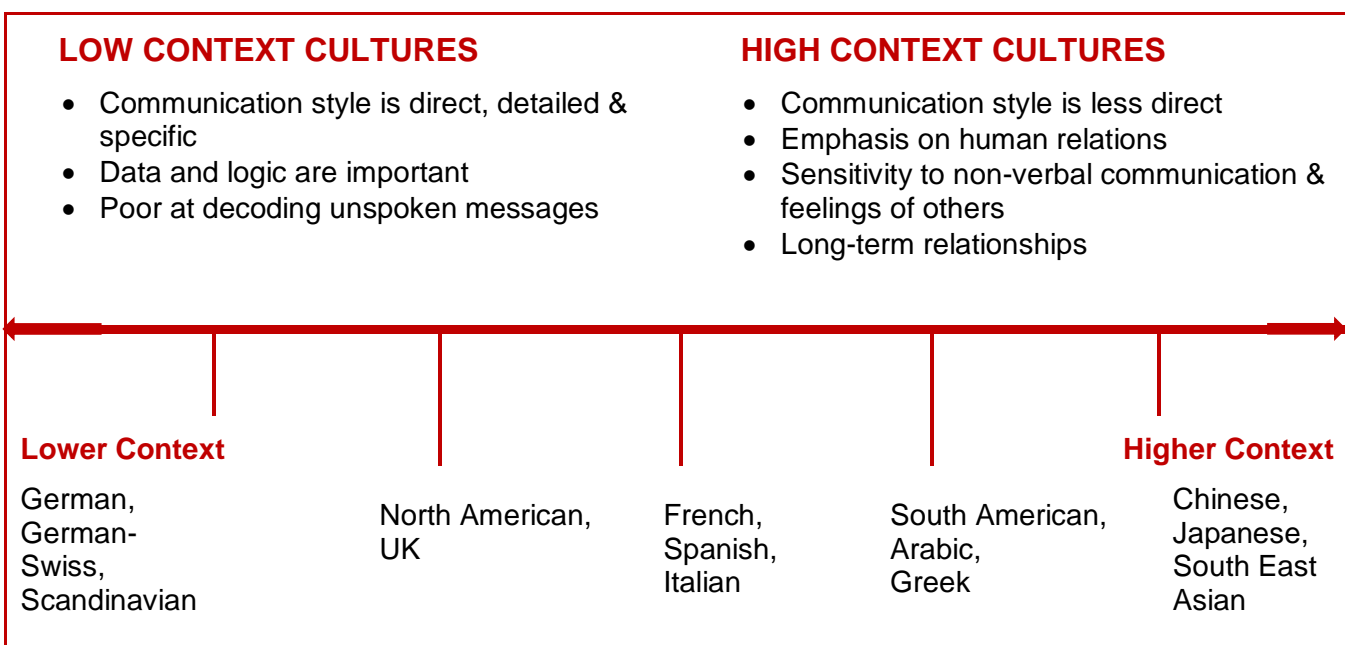




## Understanding Culture - An Introduction to Cultural Models

Culture is complex. You only have to consider how varied culture can be between cities and regions across the UK. So, understanding culture requires you to make some broad generalisations and look for patterns of behaviour to give you a starting point. Models of cultural types help with understanding different kinds of behaviour, what to expect and how to adapt your communication style to respond. This is particularly important in business when you need to build trust and credibility with potential buyers, customers and other stakeholders.

One of the simplest starting points to define the differences in communication styles across cultures is the idea of low and high context cultures developed by **Edward T Hall**:



Low context cultures are those like the UK, Switzerland, Germany, USA, Australia and Scandinavia. They are defined as having a *direct communication style* where decisions are largely based on *data*.

These cultures also have *fixed attitudes* to *time* and *punctuality*, tend to adhere to fixed schedules, and written contracts feature prominently in business.

High context cultures, on the other hand, place heavy emphasis on *relationship building* and more nuanced communication defined by behaviours, body language and silence. In these cultures, it is important not to cause embarrassment to oneself or others (the concept of 'face') and communication is more indirect. Attitudes to time are more flexible and business meetings can be less structured.



**Geert Hofstede** developed a model of six cultural types that are defined according to a number of factors, which he termed 'dimensions'. Four of these dimensions are particularly significant for exporters:

#### *Power-Distance*

How easy it is to access people with influence. UK has a low power distance structure as it is relatively easy in society and in business to access decision makers and people with relatively more power. In contrast, countries like Saudi Arabia and China have relatively high-power distance structures because hierarchies and societal status are much more defined. UK businesses can find it challenging to reach key decision makers to get business done expediently in countries with high power-distance.

#### *Individualism versus collectivism*

How defined society is by *individual achievement*, success and social behaviour. The UK is a very individualistic society relative to others. Achievement is relatively often measured with regard to individual (rather than group or team) success, and society is structured in terms of smaller family units. This is in contrast to *collectivist* cultures, such as those of Japan, China and South Korea where interdependence, group achievement and group decision-making are prominent features of society and in companies. In business this affects how decisions are made and may also be a consideration for how you market and advertise your products or services. For example, in any imagery used to advertise products e.g. sports or outdoor gear, consider how team or group activities may be more significant than individual or lone activities.

#### *Uncertainty avoidance*

This is a measure of attitudes to uncertainty and ambiguity - ultimately how averse people are to risk. The UK scores relatively low on the uncertainty avoidance index, indicating we are more open to taking risks. We tend to see this as a positive attribute e.g. it enables innovation to thrive; but it can be perplexing to cultures that are more risk-averse. Cultures which score low on this scale include Greece, Portugal and Germany. Often business processes can be jarred by needing to adhere to regulations, laws and other administrative requirements which we tend to view negatively.

#### *Long-term orientation versus short term orientation*

This dimension is about society's attitudes to time. Cultures with short-term orientation are more concerned with the past and present, in contrast with those with long-term orientation which are more concerned with the future. The UK scores high in terms of long-term orientation - our attitude in business is often 'time is money' i.e. what happens today is urgent and important because it has implications for future success. In contrast, many cultures are more concerned with responding to what happens in the present and will respond according to immediate needs. This explains why when doing business in e.g. Middle Eastern and African cultures, meetings may be interrupted to respond to phone calls or other matters, meetings may be postponed or cancelled at short notice and flexible attitudes to time lead to delays in response.

There are two further dimensions you may wish to consider Masculinity versus Femininity and Indulgence - you can find out more about the others using the link below.



**Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner** built upon Hofstede's work to produce seven cultural dimensions. You may wish to read further about these and how they apply to international business and organisational development (see link). All of these models provide interesting perspectives into how to prepare to do business with, and manage people from, different cultural backgrounds.

### **What do these models mean for me when preparing to export?**

Understanding culture also requires you to come to terms with your own mindset and viewpoint and what our culture looks like to others. Expectations and 'norms' differ on both sides and these contrasts in behavioural and communication styles can often cause frustration in business. Understanding these differences will help you succeed in international business. You can use this awareness to identify why people you do business with internationally behave differently and you can learn to adapt your own communication style and expectations accordingly.

Consider the models and their dimensions presented above. How do you think these will affect your:

- Marketing and advertising?
- Product development and localisation?
- Day-to-day business communications by email, phone and face-to-face?

### **What next?**

You can explore these ideas and develop your understanding further by discussing them with a Language and Culture Adviser. S/he will be able to explain how the countries you wish to do business with fit with these models and help you work on the implications for your international marketing and communications.

## **Reading and web links**

**Hofstede** [www.geert-hofstede.com/national-culture.html](http://www.geert-hofstede.com/national-culture.html)

### **Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner**

Riding the Waves of Culture (2002)

See also <http://www.provenmodels.com/580/seven-dimensions-of-culture/charles-hampden-turner--fons-trompenaars>

<https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/seven-dimensions.htm>

**Richard D Lewis**, When Cultures Collide

<http://www.crossculture.com/>