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Feature: UK Culture Shock

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## UK Culture Shock

A comparison of American and British styles.

By Bob Riel

**T**here has been a great deal of publicity of late about the "new Britain." This has been attributed to such factors as a revived cultural scene in London, the Britons' growing acceptance of their status as a multicultural, European nation, and even the emergence of Tony Blair as a popular young Prime Minister.

*The Boston Globe*, for example, recently wrote that Blair's "government has devoted much energy to 'rebranding' Britain, de-emphasizing its imperial past and marketing a Britain that is young, hip and on line." In just the past year, the British have opened the much-hyped Millennium Dome in London and abolished hereditary seats in the House of Lords.

When these changes are considered along with the already strong historical links between the United Kingdom and the United States, it would be easy for an expatriate to believe that he or she would have no trouble adjusting to life in Great Britain. Other than driving on the left side of the road, of course.

However, there are actually a number of subtle but important differences between the two cultures. Following are some key themes that are helpful to understanding the British.

### **A more hierarchical society**

Although the British monarchy has no real power, it remains symbolic of a structured, aristocratic lifestyle. The fact that the monarchy exists alongside a democratic government is somewhat representative of the tension in Britain between a hierarchical society and a more egalitarian one.

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Sometimes it's the small differences that cause confusion.

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■ The British are more risk-averse than Americans are. Their culture values security and tends toward the status quo. ■

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Power in the U.K. tends to be more hierarchical. Government power is centralized at the national level. There is no British equivalent to U.S. state governments, although regional legislatures have recently been introduced in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

In business, power also concentrates in the upper levels. Middle managers tend to have little decision-making authority. Nigel Fielding, a Vice President for New Market Business Development at State Street Bank, says that the hierarchy affects "who you can talk to" in a business environment. "It's difficult to operate more than one level above your own.

This means you may not always be able to speak to a decision-maker," says Fielding, a British native who last year returned to London after three-and-a-half years in Boston and another three plus years in Hong Kong.

This hierarchical culture also results in a more structured business environment. This influences the way people act in meetings, the way they speak to each other, and the way they dress. For instance, it is less common for individuals to address each other by first name. Also, the "casual days" that have become a routine part of American corporate life are much less common in the more formal business culture of the U.K.

### **Class consciousness**

Closely related to the hierarchical culture of Britain is the sense of class consciousness that pervades the society.

In a nation that believes in equal rights and has a diverse population, the British seem to place disproportionate emphasis on family and educational background. Although the importance of class is slowly diminishing, there is nevertheless an "old boy" network of government and business leaders who are

from wealthy families and who have been educated at the best schools.

Deborah Parker-Fielding, a British native who has lived in the United States, Hong Kong and Switzerland, believes that the old boy network of Great Britain is not so different from that of the U.S., but that the British are much more conscious of class than Americans are. "In the U.K., they talk about it more openly," she said. "There is also less social mobility. In the U.S., with hard work, it is possible to move up socially. But in the U.K., you are born into a class. You can move up within a class, but it is practically impossible to move to another class just through your work efforts."

A different but somewhat related issue is that of women in the workplace. There are fewer female executives in Britain's more traditional society.

John Crees, a British native who has worked for a number of years in the U.S. banking industry, says that one of the most apparent differences between the two countries is the number of American women who hold senior positions in corporations. Other observers have also noted that British society is still more male-dominated.

### **Less entrepreneurship, more relationship-building**

For a country that gave birth to the Industrial Revolution, there is a surprising lack of innovation and entrepreneurship in British society. It does exist, but not to the degree that is common in the U.S. The British and Americans are similar to the extent that they share a belief in individualism. However, the British brand of individualism differs from the American style. The self-made entrepreneur who is so much a part of the American mind does not exist in the same way for the British.

Tim Palmer, a U.S. native who recently spent four years working in London, said he noticed that the British "service culture is quite a bit different." In addition, many companies don't take advantage of "simple opportunities to make money" because they are wary of altering their traditional way of doing business, he said.

Fielding made a similar observation, noting that the British "are not always conscious of asking whether we are getting the best deal." One of the reasons for this, he said, is that "the U.K. is more reliant on relationships."

The fact that it takes time to build relationships accounts for some of the differences between British and American businesses. For one, the British are more risk-averse than Americans are. Their culture values security and tends toward the status quo.

Because of this, they prefer to take time getting to know another person in an effort to find a better long-term business partnership, whereas Americans are more often interested in securing the best immediate deal.

In addition, the emphasis on relationships accounts for differences in some daily habits, such as the fact that most British businesspeople think nothing of having a beer over lunch in a pub, while many Americans wouldn't think of drinking during the workday. The difference, most people say, is that the British see the act of sharing a drink as part of the process of relationship-building.

### **Direct, formal and polite communicators**

The British tend to be direct communicators and are not known for speaking in euphemisms. They can be quite honest in their opinions. However, this directness is sometimes masked by the fact that the British are also known to be polite and courteous, almost to a fault.

If they are inconvenienced by a missed deadline or bad service, for example, they may make a polite comment and leave it at that. They may very well be upset, but are not in the habit of showing a great deal of emotion.

In the U.S., however, the situation sometimes appears to be the direct opposite. In conversation, Americans often cushion harsh words with more comforting comments, yet they are more direct about voicing their displeasure in public.

"We call a spade a spade," says Mrs. Parker-Fielding

of the British, "but we're non-confrontational. We wouldn't tell someone off in front of others. We'd always take them aside in private."

### **English insularity**

Perhaps it is the inevitable result of living in an island nation, but the British have traditionally been an insular people. They have not always liked to think of themselves as European, seeing that designation as being reserved for residents of the continent. Also, like Americans, many British citizens do not speak another language.

This insularity has typically extended to individual lives, as well. The British are not given to talking about themselves at great length, there is more of a sense of the importance of personal space, and individuals are not likely to casually invite visitors into their homes.

This insularity does seem to be changing, at least among the younger generations of Britons, who have traveled more extensively and are more aware of the links between the U.K. and other nations. Britain's participation in the European Union also seems to be changing the country's sense of its own identity.

While the future is hard to predict, brushing up on your cultural knowledge can go a long way toward helping you do business on both sides of the Atlantic.

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