

TIME IN DIFFERENT CULTURES

ATTITUDE TO TIME

- **Attitudes to time** may differ between different **cultures** in often quite significant ways. For example, being late for an appointment, or taking a long time to get down to business, is the accepted norm in most Mediterranean and Arab countries, as well as in much of less-developed Asia. Such habits, though, would be anathema in punctuality-conscious USA, Japan, England, Switzerland, etc. In the Japanese train system, for example, “on time” refers to expected delays of less than one minute, while in many other countries, up to fifteen minutes leeway is still considered “on-time”.



Attitudes to time in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern countries is very different from that in time-conscious cultures like North America and Northern Europe

WEST WORLD

SEQUENTIAL OR SYNCHRONIC TIME PERCEPTION?

Dutch interculturalist Fons Trompenaars suggests a simple model which puts attitudes to time into two general categories

There are so many components of time that need to be understood when working across cultures that it can become quite confusing.

Dutch interculturalist Fons Trompenaars suggests a simple model which puts attitudes to time into two general categories:

- Sequential
- Synchronic

With these terms, Trompenaars attempts to describe how people around the world manage their time and how time impacts on their behaviour and mindset.

SEQUENTIAL CULTURES

- *Examples of Sequential cultures includes the UK, Germany, South Africa, USA, Australia and Switzerland*
- *Time tends to control and influence what people do in sequential cultures*

Trompenaars argues that time is dealt with in a specific logical order.

For example, people from a sequential culture may prefer to have a detailed agenda for meetings and regular milestones throughout the life cycle of a project. They rely on this structure and can find a more flexible approach to time frustrating.

Time tends to control and influence what people do in sequential cultures, and many will find value in the expression 'time is money'.

SYNCHRONIC CULTURES

- *Examples of Synchronic cultures include Italy, Argentina, Brazil and Greece*
- *People will approach tasks in a much more open way and not be as beholden to deadlines and timeframes*

People tend to manage their time quite differently than those from sequential cultures.

In synchronic cultures, people will have a much broader and more flexible perception of time. As such time is adaptable and allows much more freedom for tasks to be achieved.

People from synchronic cultures don't tend to be slaves to time, but rather they use time as guidance for how they structure their day and life.

In synchronic cultures, people will approach tasks in a much more open way and not be as beholden to deadlines and timeframes.

- Rescheduling a meeting at the last minute,
 - Showing up a few minutes after the meeting start time
 - Missing an agreed deadline
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HOW DO PEOPLE FROM SYNCHRONIC AND SEQUENTIAL CULTURES PERCEIVE EACH OTHER?

While this approach may frustrate those from a sequential culture, their more rigid and structured approach to time can seem inflexible and too strict to those from synchronic cultures. Here are a few additional different attitudes you may find in sequential and synchronic cultures. As you read through the list ask yourself what you agree with the most. Then think about how someone with the opposite approach may perceive you.

SEQUENTIAL CULTURES

People tend to do one thing at a time

Times are precise and punctuality is valued

Time is limited – time is a resource that needs to be efficiently used

Logic, efficiency and speed are the focus of business

Tasks are sometimes secondary to time

Meeting deadlines is demanded

The future is a continuation of the present

SYNCHRONIC CULTURES

People tend to do multiple things at a time

Times and deadlines are guidelines that people may intend to meet but won't always

Time is a tool, a subjective, a mouldable concept

Relationships are the focus of business and will improve efficiency

Sticking to time is secondary to building relationships

Sticking to time is secondary to building relationships

The future is interconnected with the past and present

DIFFERENT PERCEPTIONS OF TIME ACROSS CULTURES CAN CAUSE CONFLICT

The importance that people give to time can vary dramatically. Working effectively across cultures requires the ability to not only identify different perceptions of time, but it also requires the skills to be able to manage business and relationships when attitudes to time are so drastically different.

Be aware of how you may be perceived by your international counterparts when working across cultures

Attending a cross-cultural awareness course like Working Effectively across Cultures can give you an understanding of how cultures control time or let it control them, and how behaviours are therefore impacted.

Whether you see time as money, something to be controlled or something that will guide you from one point to another, think about the above attitudes to time you may find and be aware of how you may be perceived by your international counterparts when working across cultures.
