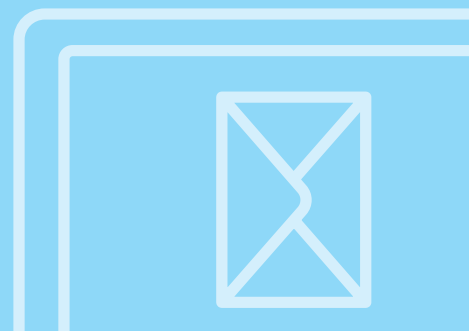
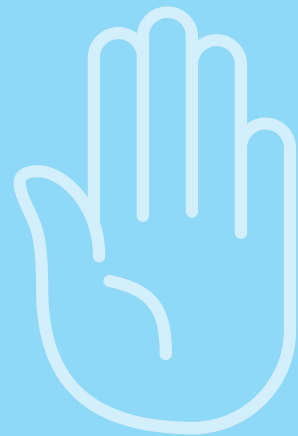
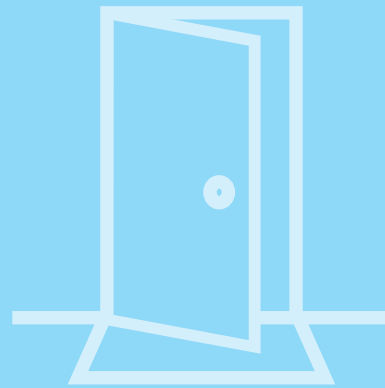




A practical inspirational guide to navigate across working cultures at UCPH



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The University of Copenhagen (UCPH) is a multicultural international workplace. We have staff and students from all over the world. In 2020, it was recorded that the staff at UCPH represents a total of 109 different countries. Some departments only have a few Danish people working for them, whereas in others, the majority is Danish. Almost 70 % of all Postdocs at UCPH are non-Danish. This diversity of colleagues representing different countries, having a unique mixture of cultural backgrounds, and speaking numerous languages, creates new opportunities, but also challenges in the way we communicate and collaborate. In a cross-cultural context like this, how does one navigate and communicate most effectively? Which typical cross-cultural issues are common at UCPH?

This handout, describes the most common cross-cultural issues and examples, which our colleagues at UCPH have experienced during recent years.

Some information is targeted towards

Danish employees
(and people coming from
similar cultural backgrounds)



and non-Danish employees,
on the same topics.



Each of the examples has a point of view from a Danish-perspective but also has a non – Danish angle – providing you with the opportunity to see different viewpoints of the same topic. We hope, with this practical handout, to provide you with information, inspiration and new ideas on how to navigate across working cultures at UCPH.

Please, do share this handout with your new colleagues and discuss these topics in a group setting, preferably with your entire team. When discussing work related matters, which have had tendencies to create problems, this handout can provide you with a good starting point in addressing issues, which could have been easily solved by being open to each other's opinions.

1. Meetings



DK: Numerous people (not necessarily the Swedes) feel that working in Denmark includes having a lot of meetings and many find them unnecessary. Meetings are in some countries not seen as “work” and therefore it may feel like a waste of time. You could consider holding shorter meetings (30/45 minutes), online meetings or “stand up” meetings.



Int: The (many) meetings in Denmark are partly held to reach consensus amongst the team. At the meeting, it is important that everybody has the opportunity and the space to express his or her opinion. There is often even an expectation that everybody, regardless of job function or status, actively participates. The outcomes of these meetings are therefore supported or at least heard by the whole group (preferably consensus) and the topics are not expected to be discussed in detail any further.



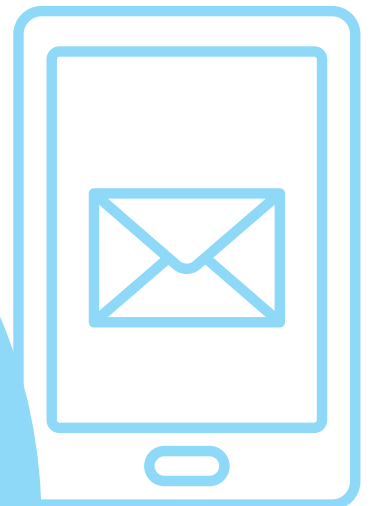
2. E-mailing / Phone calls



DK: Writing an e-mail or answering via e-mail can be very fast and effective. You can send an e-mail anytime and the receiver may answer whenever it is convenient. In Denmark, more and more people answer an e-mail with a simple “yes” or “no”. Please be aware, that some people (depending on their e.g. generation or cultural background) might find a short answer impolite and will not appreciate it. Phrases like “Thank you for your e-mail” are often used successfully in many countries when replying.



Int: In Denmark, you may receive an e-mail only stating “no”. Most people will just answer the latest e-mail and that is it. They perceive it as short, effective and quick. You may also choose to phone somebody, which can be more personal and effective than an e-mail, but some people find phoning time consuming and disturbing. Whether to e-mail or to phone is a good topic for discussion with your colleagues.



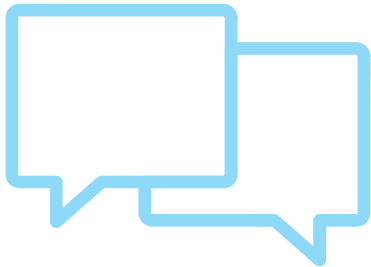
3. Titles



DK: In countries where hierarchy plays a bigger role than in Denmark, titles often have a more important function. For some people, the title on their business card is important to them. If you, for example are a teacher and you prefer that your students “just” call you by your first name, please do not be surprised if some never will, as it culturally for them, does not feel right to do so, whilst others (sharing the same cultural background) will enjoy the opportunity to call you by your first name.



Int: Cultural studies comparing hierarchy, always place Denmark in the low hierarchy countries. Don't be fooled though, as some of the hierarchical structures or habits are prevalent, but hidden. But generally, hierarchy does not play a big role in for example most meetings, in addressing people with a higher professional rank, or in general at the work place. Most people in Denmark feel most comfortable if you address them by their first name.



4. PDR / MUS



DK: Even though a lot of Danes struggle with the full understanding of the concept of “MUS” (Medarbejderudviklingssamtale), a lot of newcomers have no clue what to expect. This is partly due to the constant use of the Danish word MUS in English, which changes the focus more over on the discussion of the abbreviation rather than on the content and meaning of MUS. Moreover, it is important to explain why salary is not part of the discussion and that there is an expectation that the employee also provides feedback about their manager and the organisation.



Int: Every year it is expected that you have your PDR (Performance and Development Review) with your manager. Most people at UCPH use the word MUS, which means exactly the same as PDR. Before having your PDR, check out the information on KUNet and talk to your manager about your mutual expectations.

5. Julefrokost



DK: Julefrokost is a concept/event that all Danes know about and also what to expect, even though there might be differences from workplace to work place. Most newcomers to Denmark have no clue what to expect when attending such an event, and some think it is only about drinking, whilst others think it is only meant for Danes. Remember to specifically invite your new colleagues and explain the ins and outs of this Danish tradition.



Int: Even though many Danes have a clear division between work and private social life, it is important to participate in the yearly Christmas dinner (julefrokost). Often it even starts during work hours and most colleagues expect you to participate. Every Dane can tell you crazy stories about what happened at previous Christmas dinners and there are even 2 Danish movies called "Julefrokosten" (1976 & 2009). Mostly it is all about spending a nice afternoon (and evening) together with your colleagues while eating Danish Christmas food and drinking Danish schnapps (the schnapps is optional).



6. Can you help me?

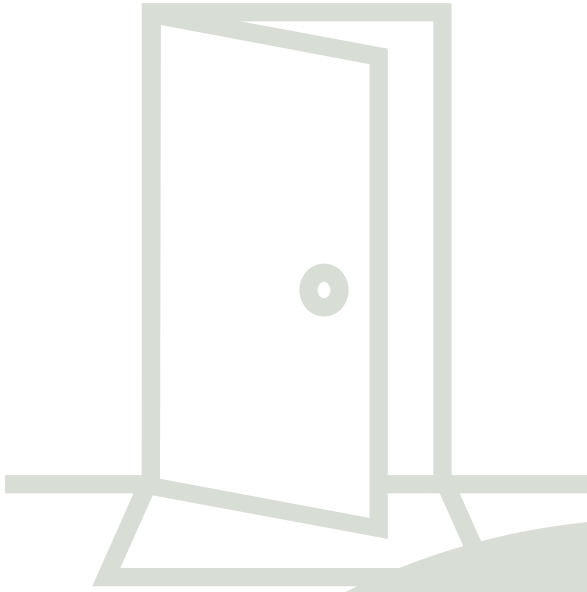


DK: In some cultures, asking for help is considered a weakness, which in turns means that some people never ask for help, even when needed. By asking the right questions, you can find out if there are any issues that needs to be addressed and how you solve them together.



Int: When you ask Danes about their job satisfaction, they very often mention the importance of helpful colleagues. If somebody asks for help, it is therefore very important to take the question serious and if you are not able to help, explain why, and preferably offer assistance in the near future. And remember that there is no such thing as a dumb question.





7. My door is always open!



DK: Many workplaces in Denmark are accustomed to self-management, where the managers' door is always open for questions, feedback or advice without the practice of micro management. This implies that the employees understand, or are used to working this way, which is not necessarily the case in other cultures. People who are used and comfortable in a hierarchical management structure, cannot always easily adjust to this management style and some might therefore need special attention and guidance.



Int: Many team leaders and managers in Denmark utilize a management style which gives their employees a lot of freedom in the way they plan and perform their work. Micro management is often not carried out, and managers prefer to give their employees a lot of responsibility. If there are questions or people need advice, they can just talk to the manager. "My door is always open for you" is a phrase which is frequently used to emphasise that everyone can ask the manager for questions or feedback at any time. This self-management style does not mean that your boss is not interested in you or your work, but instead that it is expected for you to take the initiative on getting feedback or concrete help on your projects.

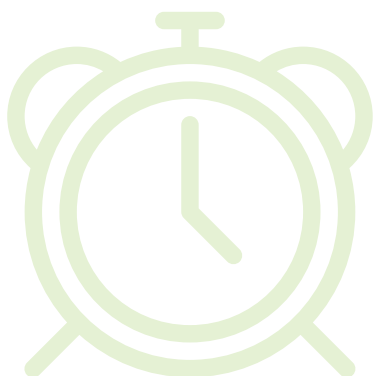
8. Feedback



DK: Giving and receiving feedback is very culturally sensitive. Many people in Denmark (have learned to) use the sandwich method when giving feedback. First you say something nice – then you give the critical part of the feedback – and then finish it off by saying something positive again. This method – as with any other method – only works if both the sender and the receiver understands it. Have in mind that if you use this method (many people use it without realising that it is a “method”), some people may misunderstand the importance of the “hidden” message in the “sandwich”.



Int: If you try to use the above mentioned sandwich method, it could make the delivery of critical feedback easier. Some people are very direct and find this method confusing, while other people never give any critical feedback at all. Your background and experience with hierarchy also plays an important role here. Giving and receiving feedback can create confusing and irritation, and it is utterly important to be able to discuss feedback in your team and hear the different stand points of the team members. Please also include the content of the previous paragraph “my door is always open!” in situations involving feedback.



9. Time



DK: The understanding and interpretation of the concept of time can vary immensely depending on which part of the world you are from. Different time perceptions can have an influence on punctuality, interactions, and the willingness to wait. For people working in a multicultural environment, it is advisable to manage expectations in connection with meeting times, deadlines and other ways of project planning.



Int: Having an appointment with a Danish person (and with people sharing the same cultural time perception) at a specific time - both privately and work related – mostly means that you show up at exactly the agreed time. “We’ll meet at 19:00” means “We’ll meet at **19:00**”, not at 19:15. Arriving too late for a meeting, can by some people be viewed as a personal insult.

How can you improve your cross-cultural communication?

SHARING IS KEY IN WORKING CROSS CULTURALLY

It is often obvious, for example because of the language, that people come from a different culture. Most people know that there will be cultural differences, but if people do not share concrete examples of what these differences are, it is hard to understand what to be aware of, or which considerations to make. Sharing experiences about the implications, feelings and customs around hierarchy for example, can be a big help in Denmark, in order to find out what consequences these difference can have, in the behavior, thoughts, and expectations of the people you are interacting with.

HOME CULTURE RULES

Cross cultural meetings most often take place where some are the majority (for examples the Danes) and other the minority. When foreign people live in Denmark, it is important that they understand the Danish cultural "rules", but it is as important for Danes to understand how other people perceive these Danish cultural norms and values. Some Danish customs such as attending a 'julefrokost' or the way to give and receive feedback, might need more explaining and it is also good to try and see your own culture with new eyes.

ASK, ASK, ASK – BE CURIOUS

Working in a multicultural place like UCPH can give a lot of exciting, annoying, funny, frustrating, nice, challenging, etc. meetings with people from different (cultural) backgrounds. To prevent unpleasant confusion and misunderstandings it is extremely important to stay curious and ask questions. Small talk questions about specific cultural differences, such as food, clothes, and language can people open up and most people appreciate a sincere interest for their cultural background. Questions about peoples' behavior can prove trickier and should not be connected to peoples' culture, in order to prevent stereotypical clichés.

REVEAL YOUR IGNORANCE

Show your ignorance and use your different cultural background as a possible explanation for your lack of

knowledge or understanding. People's intentions are in general good, positive and constructive and if you feel that this does not seem to be the case, it is important to ask and be curious instead of being defensive or to just accept the confusion as a cultural difference. Most people are willing to change or adapt their behavior, but this is only possible if they are aware of the underlying issues.

ENGLISH OR DANISH LET THE CONTEXT DECIDE

Danish, English, German, Spanish and Chinese are just a few of the many languages spoken at UCPH. When people share the same language, they are often most comfortable speaking that language, when around other people who does not speak that language. Some people who are not able to understand the spoken language, will not mind, whilst others will feel excluded. It is important to be aware that using different languages in a workplace, might lead to confusing and exclusion, even if it is not always the case. Many people at UCPH have the "rule" to change to speaking English when around a person who does not speak the same language, or checking if it is ok to continue in the different language if the other person is not showing an interest in taking part in the conversation.

When writing e-mails – especially if more people will need to read it, is often in English. This also counts for presentations. However, some non-Danish people who are trying to learn Danish, have pointed out that Danish people keep communicating in English, thereby giving them the impression that their newly learned Danish language skills were not good enough, while the Danes in the team were just trying to be accommodating. In this situation (which is true for most situations) a good solution is to clearly communicate expectations and create language guidelines together for the whole team.

To assist people with translating from Danish to English and vice versa, UCPH has developed a tool called KUTranslate on KUNet, which is a machine translation that makes it easy to do a quick translation between English and Danish of a sentence or a text.

SHARE ABOUT YOUR CULTURE

HOME CULTURE RULES

ASK, ASK, ASK

REVEAL YOUR IGNORANCE

ENGLISH OR DANISH,
LET THE CONTEXT DECIDE