



Bienvenue to your French Office...non ?

Managing your first days in a French team

Jason recalls his first days in the Paris head office of the multinational he works for:

“When I got to the front desk, they told me I had to wait because they hadn’t received my badge yet. 20 minutes went by before my manager arrived to authorize my entrance. He then walked me to my new office and told me to take my time to get settled in. He informed me that a meeting was scheduled with the team at 3pm that afternoon and that until then, I could read through the files. I had my own laptop but couldn’t get the internet connection to work. For the next few hours, I could see people walking by peering into my office but not a single person came in to introduce themselves to me! I went to get a coffee and discovered that the machine wasn’t coin-operated and that I needed a card. For lunch, I had already eaten in the cafeteria on previous trips and had a voucher so I was able to get a platter together. But I remember feeling quite alone and wondering if I was ever going to fit in!

At the afternoon meeting, I was introduced to my colleagues. They were courteous but none really reached out to make me feel welcome. As soon as I wasn’t directly involved in the conversation, they reverted to French. And to be honest, when they spoke English, I wasn’t always sure that I understood what they meant. I put my discomfort down to tiredness related to my move and to first-day jitters. But, in the days that followed, I still felt like an outsider.

I felt a little more settled once I got my degrees, certificates and photos hung up and a few of my personal mementos out. And yet, that seemed to create an even greater distance and no one seemed to respond to my obvious friendliness and approachability. Once we got into the rhythm of work – especially for the key project I was assigned to run – I had less time to worry about what they thought of me and our only priorities were progress, deadlines and results. At the end of my term there, I wasn’t too sad to leave. Though the project had been quite successful, I had never really felt quite at home. I was happy to hear that I was being transferred back to the States.

Imagine my surprise when my colleagues held a “pot de départ” for me: a get-together to mark the end of my assignment, to thank me and to wish me well on my next assignment! There were gifts from my peers, team, assistants and boss. There were a few speeches and a lot of reminiscing on the highlights of my time there. And here’s the irony of my time in France: just when I was getting ready to leave, I started to feel at home!”

Jason’s story will be a familiar one for many foreign expatriates arriving for assignments in France. Many are frustrated when their expectations aren’t met in terms of being welcomed in a new team. Some don’t hesitate to write their colleagues off as distant, cold and unwelcoming. And yet, some insight about the French and a few tips on making a good first impression can go a long way to making them feeling more at ease in the French workplace.

First of all, don’t take the lack of attention personally.

Many assignments begin in September. This period, called the “*Rentrée*”, is one of the busiest of year when the French return from the long summer break and are focusing their attention on catching up with news, launching new projects and managing their own hectic schedules. The new arrival is noticed, but may be mentally put on a “to do” list along with the many other tasks that overwhelm them. There’s a definite gap between the new expat’s time whereby a day can drag on for hours and that of the French returnee whose day speeds by.

Expect some delays in administrative processes.

For Jason, requests for his badge and computer set-up might have been delayed in the summer months. His assistant might still be holidays. His boss might have had more pressing matters to deal with. Thankfully, more and more companies are streamlining their induction process and new arrivals

can enjoy an orientation seminar, a buddy system and a clear information packet with necessary passes, badges and codes. But it's far from the case in all companies.

Don't assume the French are cold because they haven't dropped in!

Jason's French colleagues might have felt shy about doing that. Very often, French employees explain that they are afraid of invading the expatriate's space or being too direct. They don't want to interrupt or call too much attention to themselves either. This is particularly true if the expatriate is at a higher hierarchical level. They will often wait for a formal invitation to enter an office.

Give your colleagues time to get to know you.

Personal and professional lives are often kept separate. You'll probably find that relations go from courteous to friendly as people understand what they can expect from you and what you expect from them.

Observe, observe and observe!

Take a look at how others behave and work. You may notice that most of your peers don't overtly present their certificates of achievement and prizes on their walls! This, though perfectly normal in your American office, might be taken as a boastful statement here. Be yourself, but be sensitive to your environment.

Don't get upset when they speak French... you're in France!

Admit it, you probably wouldn't learn Greek to speak with a Greek expat arriving to your office in N. America. The French have gone to huge efforts to learn English for international business but this doesn't mean that they should have to sacrifice their own language when it comes to daily interaction with their peers. Trust that if information is important, they'll speak English to share it with you. And if you don't want to feel left out, learn some French! *(and if you want to challenge this advice, by all means, send me an email and we'll talk!)*

Understand that their English may not be the same as yours! Adopt Borderless English!

If you use baseball slang (give me a ballpark figure) colloquial expressions (we're up a creek without a paddle) and acronyms (another SNAFU...), your French colleagues may stare at you blankly. Language is riddled with traps – “faux amis” where words sound the same but have different meanings, cultural allusions and just plain confusing words (you'll hear “I'm so interesting” instead of “I'm interested”!). Listen, and when it doesn't seem clear, rephrase your sentence.

Trust your colleagues even if you don't always get full, detailed explanations!

Communication is often implicit, meaning that things are “understood” even if actual words haven't been said. Okay, so they never told Jason how great he was and how much they appreciated him during his assignment. But if he had looked for the signs, he probably would have seen their respect shown in other ways. Trust your colleagues and let go of your “right to know”, your “need for details”...

Finally, and most importantly, be positive. Love every day you spend in France.

For a lot of people, you are living their dream. Do you really have the right to complain when you're in the middle of one of the most beautiful cities in the world, working with some of the most fascinating people? Focus on the positive aspects of your time in France and you will see that appreciation reflected in the attitude of your colleagues and clients. Seize every opportunity to enjoy the full potential of your stay here! And you will see that when it comes to your *Pot de Départ*, you will not be saying “Good Bye”, but simply “Au revoir”.

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