**The Relativity of Time.**  
**Attitudes about punctuality vary from country to country.**

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At first glance, the concept of time is the same around the world. After all, aren't 90 seconds the same in Berlin or Beijing? What is important, however, are subjective attitudes toward time. The question isn't "Aren't 90 seconds the same everywhere?" but rather "Are attitudes toward those 90 seconds the same?" And the answer is an emphatic no. Perceptions of time vary widely in different cultures. If you don't believe that, try being 60 seconds late to appointments in Berlin and Beijing. In the latter city, it probably won't be noticed. But in Berlin, you've insulted your contact.

In every country there are people who want to remind you how important they are by making you wait. It doesn't matter if they live in a culture that respects punctuality or not--they're going to leave you sitting in their waiting room just to show you that they can. And in many cultures it is almost the duty of the higher-ranking person to be late (But subordinates may not make their superiors wait).

In the Middle East, supplicants (i.e., U.S. salespeople) can wait for hours for their appointment with a member of the al-Saud family. When they are seen, the visit may not be private, and may be riddled with interruptions from other family members and friends. The prospect may even get up and leave several times. He may be meeting with another roomful of visitors, agreeing to more appointments, or observing his religious obligation to pray five times a day. It is not wise to try for more than one sales call each day in Riyadh.

In many areas (including most of Southern Europe, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East), time is a servant, not a master. The idea that a person should be ruled by the clock is amusing. In these countries, it's fine if a person is on time. But it's also fine if a person is late. After all, life is complex, and many things happen. If you spot a friend on the way to an appointment in Paris, surely it is more important to chat with your friend than to rush to some arbitrary deadline!

In contrast, time is money in the United States and most of Northern Europe. Minutes are a precious resource. There are never enough of them. When someone is late, they have wasted your time, which is a serious insult.

It is impossible to say which way of looking at time is correct. Both are appropriate--in their own environments. We generally prefer the prevailing attitude of our native culture.

Absolute punctuality is expected in Germany, the Netherlands, Finland, and Japan. In those countries, you'd better be there early, because every minute counts. And being late demonstrates that you cannot be trusted to keep your word or manage your time.

Countries where virtual punctuality is expected include the United States, Canada, Denmark, and Sweden. In those countries, most people will not be insulted if you are less than five minutes late. (Remember, that's most people--there are sticklers for exact punctuality in all cultures.) Some countries consider you to be on time if you arrive less than a half-hour late. Such relatively punctual countries include Norway, Austria, Belgium, France, and much of Asia. Countries that practice moderate punctuality allow someone to arrive an hour late. These include Spain, Portugal, Italy, and most of Latin America. And then there are the nations of the Middle East and Africa, where punctuality is not traditionally valued. In such places, people could show up hours late (or not at all) without conveying an insult.

If you come from a country like Switzerland where there is a higher standard of punctuality, you are expected to adhere to your culture's tradition. That means, if you are a Swiss executive in Saudi Arabia, a local will expect you to be punctual. He's a Saudi, so he does not have to be punctual; you are not, so he expects you to act like a Swiss.

Rules may vary between business and social events. In many countries, being very late to dinner or parties is expected. You can show up two hours late for a party in Mexico City. It's rude to be on time . . . since your hosts will probably not be ready!

In addition to punctuality, there are many other important considerations in cross-cultural time-keeping. Different calendars are used throughout the world. The Western (Gregorian) calendar must compete with the Arabic, Hebrew, and Chinese calendars, among others. When different calendars are in use, it is best to use both calendars' dates on all memos and correspondence. Avoid using terms such as "we need delivery within a month," because different calendars have months of different lengths. Instead, give the exact number of days. Be aware of differences in workweeks. The traditional Islamic Holy Day is Friday, while the Jewish Sabbath is Saturday (actually, sundown Friday to sundown Saturday). And remember that holidays vary throughout the world.

Even when both parties use the Western calendar, there are different ways of keeping and recording the time. In the United States, it is customary to write the month first, then the day, then the year (often just the last two digits). So, in the United States, 5/3/98 means May 3, 1998.

However, most of the world considers this backwards. How much more logical it is to write the day, then the month, then the year. To most Europeans and Latin Americans, 5/3/98 means March 5, 1998. They may also separate the numbers using something other than a slash, such as periods (5.3.98) or commas (5,3,98).

There are more and more aspects of cross-cultural time-keeping to consider . . . but we're out of time! :)