



Looking at Dutch culture

Upon arrival in the Netherlands from abroad, you'll soon be confronted with some typical Dutch behavior and norms. Sometimes these cultural misunderstandings can be hilarious, at other times they can be downright frustrating. This handout provides a very short overview of some Dutch key cultural values and what they mean for you.

Three key values can sum up Dutch culture:

Egalitarian

The Dutch are very egalitarian, which means they have a fundamental belief that everyone is or should be equal and treated equally. They have problems with hierarchy and authority – which means they don't show automatic respect for 'the boss'. It also means that the Dutch are likely to help someone who falls 'below the average'.

In university you can address your seniors, even professors, by their first name and they appreciate informal contact. Because most (not all) of them don't like authority very much, they usually don't give people clear and direct orders. Instead, they 'couch' their 'direct commands' via indirect phrases. Instead of saying: "You should do this", they would say "Maybe we could do this..?". They are the persons that will assess your performance and your thesis, so it is wise to take their suggestions seriously even though they are not phrased as an order. Make a summary of the actions you plan to do, check with your supervisor if that is correct, write them down and mail them to your supervisor(s): this makes the agreement of who does what more clear for all parties involved.

Utilitarian

The Dutch are utilitarian, which means that they always keep a keen eye on 'what's the benefit for me?' and on 'what can we do'? It makes the Dutch more businesslike than many other cultures. Within business-culture, they are also more results-oriented: friendly chit-chat before a business meeting is still required, but they do come to the point rather quickly.

Colleagues may be very direct in their feedback. Suppose you gave a presentation. Ask an Englishman what he thought about it and he would say 'interesting'. Ask a Dutchman what he thought and he will give you very direct, mostly negative feedback. This goes so far that the Dutch feel that *not giving criticism* is an insult. Reckoning with someone's feelings before giving feedback is something one only does to people who are really inferior, the Dutch believe. The best way to deal with this is to realize that 'feedback is a gift': it is given with the best intentions, even though the words may be harsh.

Organized

The Dutch are very organized, including their social and private life, via their agenda. They're also bureaucratic, often you need to fill in loads of forms to get things done, which is not only a burden for those visiting from abroad, but can be quite troublesome for the Dutch themselves as well. You will find that your colleagues really stick to the time you set for an appointment. Coming late to a meeting, even if it is just a few minutes is considered not polite.



Independence & initiative

In the Dutch university system, more than in some other countries, PhD's are expected to work quite independently and take initiatives themselves. Don't wait for others to tell you what to do. Regarding the content of your research your own opinion on things is valued highly. Even though you might not be an expert on the matter yet, people would like you to state your own opinion and even to disagree at times with your supervisor(s). That is what they feel makes an interesting academic climate.

Crucially, if you need help, the Dutch also expect you to ask for help and to organize your own help. Fundamentally, this sums up the Dutch way of doing projects: make a list of what should be done (organized), then think of what you can't do by yourself: is there something you need to know, some input you need from someone else? If so, go and ask for it: the Dutch are eager to help whenever you ask for it, because the Dutch don't want anyone to be less than equal (egalitarian). Do remember though to plan regular meetings with your supervisors in advance because they have a busy schedules with many meetings.

Socially

Generally, the Dutch stick to their agendas. Even in private and social life. For you, this means that if you want to go grab a beer with someone or do some jogging with someone, you should probably send them an email, text them or call them to set up an 'appointment' to do just this. This is one of the key reasons why it's hard for people from abroad to make (new) friends with Dutch people: they're always 'too busy' ("druk, druk, druk", means 'busy, busy, busy') to meet up with you on the spot. It feels weird to make an appointment for fun stuff, but this is really how the Dutch do it. Social life in the Netherlands originally takes place in officially organized clubs such as soccer- or other sports clubs, a choir, a gardening society. This may be difficult for newcomers whose best strategy is to join a club if they would like to meet and socialize with Dutch people. One last advise would be that even though most people will be able to understand and speak English, if you would like to settle in the Netherlands, you need to learn Dutch.

Books and websites to read

Website with typical Dutch behavior: www.stuffdutchpeoplelike.com

Popular introduction to Dutch culture: The Undutchables. An observation of the Netherlands, its culture and its inhabitants. Colin White and Laurie Boucke. White Boucke Publishers.

Deals more with business practices: Dealing with the Dutch. Jacob Vossestein. KIT Publishers

More analytical book (this handout is mostly based on it): The Low Sky. Understanding the Dutch. Han van der Horst. Scriptum Publishers.