

Working with people of different cultures



Learner guide

Ready for work

Pre-employment skills

Working with people of different cultures

Version 1.2



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People from all over the world

Australia is a multicultural country. This means people come to live in Australia from many countries. They come from many cultures and have many religions.

Today in Australia we can share in the food, celebrations, music, language and dress of almost every country in the world.

People have the right to practise their traditions and religion free from discrimination.



Culture and religion

A person's culture and religion can affect the way they behave. It can also affect the way they speak and dress.

Here is some more information about culture and religion.

Culture

A culture is the way a group of people live. Culture refers to the things that make the group the same, such as their habits, beliefs and traditions.

For example, people from different Aboriginal groups may participate in cultural activities and traditions, and may speak in the language of their country.



Religion

A religion is an organised set of beliefs. It is what you believe in; for example, one god or many gods.

There are many religions such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism or Buddhism.

Having a religion may mean celebrating special days or holidays. For example:

- Jewish people celebrate Rosh Hashanah or their New Year.
- Ramadan is a special celebration for people who are Muslim.
- Christian people celebrate the birth of Jesus at Christmas.



Australian workplaces

Most Australian workplaces have people of many cultures and religions. For example:

- One out of four workers in Australia was born in another country.
- One out of five workers in Australia speaks a language other than English at home.

All workplaces rely on good teamwork, which means you need to work well in a team. You need to respect the other people in the team and listen to what they have to say. You need to think about other people's feelings and treat them kindly.

It helps if you understand the people you work with. This means knowing things about other cultures.

Think about ...

Think about the people where you live or the people you see on the street. Think about your friends. What do you already know about the way people of other cultures dress, speak or behave?

What about your own culture? You probably don't even notice it, because it is 'normal' to you. What would a person from another culture notice about you?



Ways of dressing

A person may wear special clothes because of their culture or religion. An employer (or boss) must let their workers dress in clothes important to their religion or culture. If the clothing is a safety risk, the person may not be able wear it. Workers and employers must be understanding about people's religious and cultural beliefs.

Here are some ways of dressing you may see in the workplace.

Example	What it looks like
<p>Some Muslim women wear a head scarf or a head cover called a 'chador' or a 'hijab'. They may also want to cover their arms and legs.</p>	
<p>Sikh men wear turbans. They do this as soon as they are old enough to tie a turban. Sikh men wear turbans all the time. It is part of their religion.</p>	
<p>Some Jewish men wear a skull cap called a 'yarmulke' or a 'kippah'.</p>	
<p>Today many people have piercings. Some workplaces do not allow them as they may be a safety risk. However, many Hindu women have a nose piercing. It is part of their culture. They should be allowed to wear it if it is safe to do so.</p>	

Think about ...

- Do you belong to a cultural or religious group?
- Do you have a special way of dressing for your culture or religion?
- Do you wear anything (clothing, jewellery) that shows your religion?
- Do you think other people treat you with respect?

Activity 1

1. Do you work or study with anyone who wears religious or cultural clothing? If yes, describe what they wear.

2. How do you think people would feel if someone made fun of the way they dress for their religion?

3. Do you think it would be hard to be different from most other people at work or school? If yes, why would it be hard?

4. Why should workplaces let people dress for their culture or religion?

[Click to complete Activity 1](#)

Religious practices

A person's religion affects the way they dress. It can also affect the way they behave and do things.

Example

There may be days when people need to go to special festivals.

For example, New Year (Diwali) is a time of celebration for Hindu people. It is a festival of lights.



Some people have rules about what they eat or have times when they do not eat at all.

For example, some Buddhist people are vegetarian (do not eat meat or meat products).

During the Christian time of Lent (six weeks before Easter), people may fast. This means not eating during certain times of the day.



Some people may need to pray at certain times. For example, Muslim people pray five times a day.

Some Australian workplaces have prayer rooms. This way, the workers and students can pray there during the day and still get their work and study done.



Ways of behaving

A person's culture and religion may also affect how they behave.

Here are some examples.

Eye contact

Example	What it looks like
<p>Do you like people to look you in the eyes when you speak to them? In some cultures this is a sign of respect. You may think a person is rude if they do not look you in the eyes.</p>	
<p>People of other cultures may not look you in the eyes. They may look down. In their culture, this shows they respect the other person. Some people of Aboriginal and Pacific Island cultures do this.</p>	

Greeting people

What do you do when you meet a new person at work? Here are some examples of how to greet people.

Example

In Australia, people often shake hands when they meet.



Shaking hands is not always the polite thing to do. In some cultures and religions men and women do not touch each other.



In Japan, people may bow to greet each other.



People of Middle Eastern cultures may put their right hand on their heart.



If you know the person's name, it is polite to use it. For example, say, 'Hello Jasmine'. If you don't know the person well, you may use their title and surname. For example, 'Good morning Mrs Singh'.



After you have met someone, remember how they have greeted you. The next time you meet them, you can greet them in the same way. This shows respect for the other person.

Personal space

Personal space is the distance between you and a person you are talking to. People of some cultures stand quite close to each other. For example, people from South America stand closer together than people from England.

This may feel strange if you are used to more personal space. If someone takes a step back when you are talking to them, you may be standing too close.



Ways of speaking

Do you like to have discussions with people? Some people enjoy doing this. They don't mind if people disagree with them and want to hear what everyone really thinks. But in some cultures people don't like this type of discussion. They think that disagreeing with someone is disrespectful.

Be careful when having discussions with people at work. Try to respect the other person's opinion even if you don't agree with it.

When people from different cultures are working together, they sometimes don't understand each other. You need to be patient and talk things over. You could find out about the other person's culture to understand them better.

For example, what would you think of someone who speaks very quietly? Do you think they are shy or timid, or even rude because it is hard to hear what they are saying? In some cultures, people use a quiet voice to show respect and it is not an indication of shyness.

Yes and no

A person who speaks English as their first language usually says 'yes' if they agree with something. They may also say 'yes' if they agree to do something. They say 'no' if they disagree or won't do something. But people who did not grow up speaking English sometimes use 'yes' in a different way.

For people of some Asian cultures, their 'yes' (like 'hai' in Japanese) means 'I hear you' or 'I understand what you are saying'. It doesn't mean they agree with you. This can cause problems in workplaces.

Sometimes people say 'yes' to be polite, even though they don't understand what you are saying. They may think that saying 'no' is rude, or they may be embarrassed because they don't know how to do something.

When someone says 'yes', make sure you know whether the person really agrees with you or really agrees to do something.

Story



Rika is from Malaysia. She is studying and working in Australia. She does not speak English very well.

Rika works part time in a busy supermarket. Her boss, Andy, calls her and says, 'The storeroom is in a mess. It's time it was cleaned. Do you understand?'

Rika says 'yes'. She means that she understands that the storeroom is messy. However, Rika does not understand that Andy is asking her to clean it.

Later, Andy finds the storeroom has not been cleaned. He is annoyed with Rika. She is upset that she did not understand Andy.

Activity 2

1. What could Andy have said to Rika to make sure she understood it was her job to clean the storeroom?

2. Can you think of a time when you have not understood a person? If yes, explain what happened.

[Click to complete Activity 2](#)

What you have learnt

Put a ✓ in the box when you have understood these things.

- Australia is a multicultural country. This means people come to live in Australia from many countries.
- A culture is about how a group of people live together. Culture refers to the things that make the group the same.
- A religion is an organised set of beliefs. It is what you believe in; for example, one god or many gods.
- Australian workplaces have people of many cultures and religions.
- Workers should respect each other's cultures and religions.
- A person's culture or religion may affect the way they:
 - dress
 - behave
 - speak.
- Sometimes people from different cultures don't understand each other.
- If people talk to each other honestly and kindly, they can fix these problems and have a good work team.

Check your learning

Find someone who was born in a country different from the one you were born in. The person may be a friend or a neighbour. They may be someone you work, study or play sport with.

Ask the person you choose to tell you about their culture. For example:

- Does the person have special days to celebrate?
- Do they have a special kind of food?
- Do they wear anything special?
- Do they have special rules in their family about how to behave?

1. Write down some of the things you learnt from the person about their culture.

2. What things about the other person's culture were the most different from your own culture?

3. Why do you think it is important to understand differences between people in the workplace?

[Click to complete](#)

Answers

Answers to activities

Activity 1

Answer to Question 1

Answers will vary. Here is an example.

People may wear a headscarf and clothes that cover their arms and legs. They may wear a skullcap or turban, or have piercings.

Answer to Question 2

Answers will vary. Here is an example.

The person would feel upset as their religion and how they dress would be very important to them.

Answer to Question 3

Answers will vary. Here is an example.

It would be hard being different from others as you may feel left out, or that people would not understand you.

Answer to Question 4

Answers will vary. Here is an example.

Culture and religion are very important to some people, so they should be able to express their culture and religion at work and at home. It is also a legal requirement that people are allowed to wear religious clothing at work if it is safe to do so.

Activity 2

Answer to Question 1

Answers will vary. Here is an example.

Andy could have said, 'The storeroom is very messy. Please clean the storeroom, Rika'.

Answer to Question 2

Answers will vary depending on experience.

Answers to check your learning

Answers will vary depending on the person chosen and the country they were born in.

Here are example answers.

Answer to Question 1

The person is from the Italian culture and values family time and celebrates Catholic holidays with the extended family. They place great importance on meal times and sharing meals with family and friends.

Answer to Question 2

I have a small family so have never taken part in big family celebrations. I am also not religious, so this was very different for me.

Answer to Question 3

It is important so people understand and respect each other and can work well as a team. If you understand a person, you can communicate better with them.