

Why Belgians don't drink milk in a meeting and the Dutch love Monday

A guest article by Marnick Vandebroek

The Dutch are cheap and loud, and Belgians are quiet and somewhat on the dim side. We all know the stereotypes and why they are mostly wrong. But which differences are true, and how do they show up when doing business? We've asked Marnick Vandebroek: digital transformer, speaker coach, stand-up comic and travelling between Brussels and Amsterdam on a daily basis.

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Belgians are beer drinking, chocolate eating, too down to earth for their own good, compromisers. That live next to Dutch trailer pulling, cheap, orange, cheese eating, tulip lovers. Or at least that is what the stereotypes say. I'm a Belgian and have spent the last two years traveling between Brussels and Amsterdam. The two questions I get the most is: "How long did you drive?" and "Do you see a difference between Belgian and Dutch people?"

My answer to the first question is mostly, 'too long'. To the second one, 'I do', and it is not the stereotypical cultural differences you would expect. Below are 5 differences that I experience when it comes to working together and doing business.

Cappuccino Monday VS. It was good

The first cultural difference between Belgium and the Netherlands starts first thing Monday morning. Having a meeting on Monday in the Netherlands always requires you to add an extra hour to the meeting time. It starts off with a chat with the rest of the world at the coffee machine. Here you don't make a black depressing Monday morning cup of comfort, but a nice happy flappy stylish cappuccino. If you manage to get out of the coffee corner before the end of the week, you can all go to the meeting. A meeting that always starts with everybody introducing themselves, even though most of the people in the room already know each other. BUT there could well be a spider in the

room that wasn't there the last time and we don't want to exclude anybody now do we. Somebody will then pose the million dollar question, 'How was everybody's weekend?' (Here is where you need the extra hour).

When a Dutch person asks you how your weekend was, that is a question not to be taken lightly. When a Dutchman asks you this, he genuinely wants to know how your weekend was. Not only from you, but of the entire room. And please, don't be afraid to go into detail. The remarkable thing is, a Dutchie will actually listen and is really interested, because you may have passed your story on as just something you start the week with, but he will ask you a week later if your cat is already feeling better after that big hairball last weekend.

On the other side you have Monday morning in Belgium. The coffee is black and the conversation short. It doesn't mean we are not friendly, we just love being efficient. So the question, 'How was your weekend?', is mostly answered by, 'It was good, now back to business.'

Listen to the boss VS. What does the cleaning lady think

In Belgium it doesn't really matter how many people you put into a meeting room, because there is an orgchart to respect. For a Dutch person an orgchart is something that is just there to show him the way



to the top and how many levels he is still away from success, but for a Belgian it actually means something. When in a Belgian meeting it mostly comes down to who has the biggest paycheck in the room. This person will make the final decision and he or she will speak first before the minions take a stand. (I know I'm exaggerating this a bit, but it is for the good of the message)

While in the Netherlands it is a whole different story. There everybody has to have an opinion, which is ok, but also everybody is asked that opinion. Even the cleaning lady will have to come in and do her say. No disrespect to cleaning ladies of course, but everybody has their expertise. It is sometimes even hard to tell who is the biggest honcho in the room. In Belgium you would look at the size of the car, but with Dutch car taxes versus ours, the presence of one Belgian in the meeting might cloud this parking lot strategy. We see you there VS. Do you have some time When the Dutch know what they want, they take it. If they think you are useful to their cause, they will not hesitate to contact or involve you in their mission. While the Belgians want the same thing, but are a bit more polite by asking first. There is something to say about both approaches, but in the end it comes down to having a week full of Dutch meetings, while Belgians are still trying to squeeze in

some time. The same thing goes when the meeting is actually there. The Dutch walk in and say, coffee, nice, want some! While Belgians first apologize for their presence, ask if it bothers anybody if they breathe and then answer to the question, 'Do you want some coffee?' - 'Well, if it isn't too much trouble.'

Screw it let's do it VS. We will get back to you

Judging by the traffic situation in Brussels and Antwerp you wouldn't say Belgians are very efficient, but I dare to state the opposite. I always compare Belgians to Hobbits. Not to offend them or myself, but to describe their way of working and looking at the world. We are small as a country, half of the world still thinks we are the capital of Brussels or do not exist at all, even though we host the European Union. We aren't the loudest bunch of people and because of our small market, don't always have the biggest budgets to work with. But due to those restrictions and humble approach we are very efficient and get things done. (Talking about our way of working, not our politics) The Dutch are more like the dwarfs, more gold, so more money to spend, louder and maybe a bit bigger.

When they go for something, they also get things done, but it might not always be the most efficient way. Although they will make it look like that afterwards ;) The big result of this difference is that a Dutchman will



Who is Marnick Vandebroek?

Marnick Vandebroek is a digital transformer, speaker coach, moderator and stand-up comic.

He runs www.standupcompany.com, training people to speak in public and helping them to tell a story that truly inspires an audience instead of being just the next boring powerpoint presentation.

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invest in an idea if he believes in it and will take the hit if it fails. A Belgian will analyze the risk and will back down if the risk of failure is too high. They often say, let the Dutch try it first, if it works, we will take it and make it better.

After work drink VS. Are you crazy, it's 5 pm

If you live in Belgium as a foreigner you will probably notice that it is very hard to make Belgian friends. Even for Belgians it is hard to do that, because if you weren't part of the team in high school, well then chances are you are never getting in. This makes friendships, deep, long and lasting, but also hard to expand. Looking at the business side of things, you see pretty much the same thing. Work in Belgium is work and after 5pm the will to go and get drunk with colleagues isn't as strong as with the Dutch. They are completely the opposite. The more people the better and any reason is a good reason for an after work drink. For example: The Belgians plan an event and discuss if there is still time

for a drink afterwards. The Dutch start with planning the drink and go from there.

Now I know what you are thinking, 'We still don't know why Belgians don't drink milk in a meeting?' Well, it's very simple. There are three kinds of people that drink milk; babies, Dutch people and BA Baracus. All the rest of us know it is just weird when you are an adult ;-).

Just to make sure, there is no right or wrong in this blogpost. I love doing business in both countries and I'm lucky I can. Working with different nationalities shows you the weird and funny habits, but also the good ones. The ones you can take back home to challenge your own way of working and dealing with people.

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