

**Business Etiquette** from the website:

[http://www.executiveplanet.com/index.php?title=South\\_Korea](http://www.executiveplanet.com/index.php?title=South_Korea)

## **Guidelines for business attire**

Conservative dress prevails in South Korean business culture.

Subdued, conservative colours are considered the most appropriate choices for the initial meetings. You can slowly introduce bright colours after you build your credibility and relationships. In business settings, standard attire for men includes a suit, a white shirt, and a conservative tie. However, recently more people, especially young people in their 20s and 30s, started wearing colored shirts and bright coloured ties. Professional women typically wear conservative business suits or dresses.

Sleeveless tops and miniskirts are considered unprofessional in most business settings. If you know you are going to a restaurant where you have to sit on the floor, avoid tight skirts. As a guest, dress conservatively, even for informal occasions. Some Koreans have started wearing sleeveless shirts and shorts for their outings.

## **Conversation**

### **General Guidelines**

You may be asked personal questions regarding your age, salary, religion, and family life. If you don't want to answer, remain polite but try to gracefully side step such questions. In most cases, people make these inquiries because they think that they can establish rapport by finding common denominators. These questions may also be asked to determine your status--which means everything in South Korean business culture. For the age/status conscious Koreans, it is important to guess and/know the approximate age or relative status of their counterparts.

Modesty is very important in South Korea. When you are paid a compliment during a conversation, you may say that you are not worthy of such praise. If the giver of the compliment has significant international experience, you can simply say 'Thank You' for his or her kind remarks. However, you can compliment another person, since these comments are still very much appreciated. At the same time, singling out one person in a group may embarrass the receiver.

Generally, Koreans have an intense pride in their country and a rich sense of its history. Consequently, it is important that you make every effort not to confuse the history and culture of Korea with other Asian countries, especially Japan. Some older Koreans who grew up under the Japanese colony many not appreciate gifts from Japan or comparison of Korea with Japan.

Answer questions affirmatively and in the most positive way, even when you have to deliver negative information. If you are declining a request for a favor, you should sound very apologetic.

Be concise and direct in your response. When you are asked a question, remember that 'less is more', so get right to the point without being rude.

Tone down hand motions and facial expressions when talking. Being too animated is frowned upon.

### **Welcome Topics of Conversation**

South Korea's cultural heritage

South Korea's economic success, especially in telecommunication

Korea Wave (Hallryu, including K-Pop)

South Korean companies' international accomplishments

Fashion and design

Sports [especially accomplishment in golf, baseball, and the Winter Olympics, just general well-being of a family, such as 'Is your family well?']  
Personal hobbies

### **Topics to Avoid**

Korean politics/local politics

Personal family matters other than asking their well-being

### **Addressing others with respect**

If you know someone's title, you can address him/her by both the title and his/her family name, i.e. Mr. Kim or Director Park. Don't call older/senior people and customers by their first name unless you are asked to do so. In Korean corporations doing business internationally, it's been very popular to use the two initials of one's first name, such as C. H. Kim for Chan-Ho Kim. Some people have also adopted Western names.

Korean names are different from Western names. A person has, in the following order, a family name and a given name. Sometimes, a given name may include a part with a family/generation heritage.

Korean family names tend to be one-syllable, while given names are more likely to be two-syllables.

The most common family names are Kim, Park, and Lee. These names are written in English in various ways: Lee might be spelled as Rhee or Yee. You may meet several people at once with the last name of 'Kim': nearly a quarter of the population has this last name.

Married women will retain their maiden names.

When writing formal letters or e-mails, address the recipient as 'Dear', with the title and last name.

### **Selecting and presenting an appropriate business gift**

Giving gifts to acquire favors or build relationships is a common practice in the workplace, and reciprocity is expected.

While your gift will demonstrate your thoughtfulness, where it was made is also of crucial importance. They will appreciate gifts from your own country or regions. Avoid items made in the underdeveloped countries, unless they are cultural icons or souvenirs.

Gift-giving is often practiced in a business setting. Good gifts for a first trip include office items with your company logo or something that is commemorative of your home region. Your gift should be of good quality but modestly priced.

When you plan to give a gift to several people within an organization, be sure to give a gift of greater value to the senior person. The gifts you present to that person's subordinates may be similar, as long as they are of lesser value than the one you give their superior. Or, you can give a gift that the whole team can enjoy.

A gift of money should be put in an envelope. Cash is popular for weddings, holidays [for children], birthdays, funerals, etc.

When visiting a family, suitable gifts include crafts from your home region, fruit, cake, chocolates, flowers, imported coffee, etc. Imported liquor and cigarettes may be given to those who like to drink and smoke.

Expect initial resistance to receiving a gift. This reluctance is considered good manners, so be persistent.

Use both hands when giving or receiving a gift. Gifts are not opened in the presence of the giver, unless you are a very good friend. If so, you can ask him/her, 'Do you want me to open it?'

Whenever a person receives a gift, it is customary for the recipient to give another gift of similar value in return at a later time. Therefore, when you give a gift, ensure that it is compatible with the recipient's economic means because if he or she cannot reciprocate, 'loss of face' will result. Similarly, if you receive a gift that is far too extravagant and a potential bribe, send it back, citing your firm's policy not to accept a gift with a certain \$ amount. You should be very polite in returning it and express your gratitude and regret for not being able to accept such generosity.

## **Business Entertaining**

When courting clients, one must be mindful of differences between business entertaining in Korea and entertaining in Western cultures. For example, many Korean businessmen tend to believe that they will get to know a business partner or colleague or customer better over a few drinks. It is common to be invited out after business hours. Bars are popular venues for business entertaining, particularly 'karaoke' bars where patrons are encouraged to sing along to recorded popular songs.

Some people may use drinking venues to resolve a conflict or close a difficult business deal. Be aware that comments and promises during entertainment can be taken seriously afterwards.

In a given group, there may be someone who encourages others to have another drink. However, there have been efforts to respect individual choices for those who don't want to drink. Keeping your glass full and drinking slowly makes it less likely that another will be poured for you. Some foreigners and Koreans have been known to pour unwanted alcohol surreptitiously into a nearby plant or a cup. Public transportation or substitute drivers are recommended for drinkers.

Recently more Korean men have been conscious of health and younger Koreans have been mindful of drinking quality, not quantity. So wine has become a fashionable choice. Traditionally, respectable Korean women were expected to abstain from alcohol. This attitude has changed. However, as more women join the work force, different teambuilding or entertaining venues, such as going to a concert or theater, has been gaining popularity.

For non-drinkers, it's OK to drink water or soda, but try to enjoy the camaraderie. Informal outings can be an important part of building relationship. If you just don't want to drink at all, you may explain the reason, for example, you may say that you cannot drink alcohol for religious reasons or medical reasons.

If you don't enjoy going out in the evening, you can gently ask your host where and to what kind of place they are going. You can choose not to join them, citing valid reasons, such as, you have more work to do at the hotel or need to contact your family members back home, etc.

## **Drinking Protocol**

The person of lower status, or the host of the event, will offer a glass to the most honoured person.

If the status or age difference is very great, the glass is offered with two hands. Or, you may try to support the right hand with the left.

The person receiving the glass, depending on his status, will also receive it with two hands or with the right supported by the left.

The giver then pours the alcohol into the glass held by the receiver.

After draining their glasses, some people practice giving them to another person. As the drinking continues, everyone is offered a glass, which is then filled. You may also fill your own glass. Don't start drinking until everyone has been served. Side dishes for drinking, known as 'anjoo', will be served along with the alcohol and may include dried beef, dried fish, nuts or even fruit. Some places offer an anjoo menu. At other establishments, anjoo is brought to your table even if not ordered, but even so it is not free of charge.

## **Business dining**

As an evening out progresses in Korea, some may be asked to sing solo. If you are asked to sing, don't panic even if you cannot carry a tune. Just do your best and remain gracious. It will be useful to know a simple song, such as 'You are my Sunshine.'

When you are invited to a meal by your business partner in Korea, try to accept the invitation. You can reciprocate it within a reasonable amount of time during your next visit.

Dinner is the largest meal of the day, and usually takes place between 7:00 and 9:00 p.m. If you are invited to a home, consider it a tremendous honour.

While it is common in other countries to extend dinner invitations to spouses, this is not the case when interacting with South Koreans. Business entertaining is often reserved for the parties directly involved in the business.

The person who extends the invitation is expected to pay for the meal. Regardless, a good-natured argument over who will pay is to be expected.

It is important to remove your shoes when entering a home or traditional restaurant with floor seating or a temple. If you see indoor slippers in a room, put them on. Position your shoes so that the toes are pointing away from the building. When putting your shoes back on, do not sit with your back toward the temple.

When you are invited to a home, don't wander around and look into rooms such as the kitchen. Entertaining will be confined to a few select areas.

Eating at a low table, sitting on soft cushions set on the floor is common in Korean homes and restaurants. Men traditionally sit cross-legged; women sit with knees bent and legs together, to one side. If you begin to feel uncomfortable, stretch your legs straight in front of you under the table.

The best seat--usually the center seat facing the door-- should be offered to the most honored person present in the room.

Sometimes, a hostess may not join the party for the meal; she will be in the kitchen preparing food. Instead, she may join the group at the end of the evening for singing and drinks.

The most common South Korean toast you will hear is 'Gun-bae.' When you raise your glass, be sure to do so with your right hand. To show extra respect toward the person being toasted, support your right arm with your left hand. Be aware that the minute you drain your glass, it is a cue to your host that you would like a 'refill.'

Some Koreans may not talk much during meals. They prefer to concentrate on their food while eating and talk later over coffee/tea after a meal is finished.

Refrain from discussing business during a meal unless your host brings it up first.

Rather than waiting for the host to put food on your plate, you may serve yourself, if he asks you to. But don't start serving yourself or eating before the host initiates it.

Do not put food taken from a serving dish directly into your mouth. Transfer it to your plate or bowl first.

Chopsticks are the most commonly used utensils, but you can ask for forks or knives at restaurants in big cities. You will also be offered a spoon for eating soups and dishes with noodles.

Foods of any kind should not be picked up with your fingers. Fruit is eaten in slices with forks.

## **Korean meal guidelines**

Always use your right hand in passing and receiving items at the table. If you would like to show added respect for someone, allow your left hand to support your right arm when offering an item.

It is polite to refill your neighbour's cup and soy sauce bowl when empty; expect the others to do the same for you.

Korean meals include rice and soup, and a lot of side dishes called 'ban-chan.' They accompany entrees free of charge. Be aware that many of the dishes will be extremely spicy.

Many Koreans eat similar meals for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. However, some young people have started eating a simpler breakfast with coffee and toast, instead of a hot breakfast with rice and soup.

Every meal includes soup, which is normally served hot, and may contain a number of ingredients, such as fish, bean paste, beef, and bean sprouts.

Kimchi is served with Korean meals. Kimchi can be made of different vegetables, such as cucumber or turnip. But most commonly it is made of Korean cabbage which is rinsed with salt water and left to ferment overnight. Then spices and herbs are added, including garlic, red pepper, green onion and ginger.

Rice is the staple of each meal.

Noodles are very popular, substituting for rice. There are a wide variety of rice, potato, wheat and flour noodles.

Bones and shells are placed on the table or a spare plate.

The host may offer more food several times. If you are hosting a party in Korea, offer food to your Korean guests more than once because some may be shy in accepting at the first invitation.

When you are finished eating, place your chopsticks on the table or on the rest. Leaving them sticking out of rice is discouraged, since this is how offerings are made to ancestors.

A service charge is automatically included in fancy restaurant and hotel bills. Tipping is not necessary.

## **Korean Foods**

**Jap Chae** This dish consists of clear noodles stir-fried with meat and vegetables.

**Naeng Myun** This summer dish consists of buckwheat noodles in beef broth or without a broth, served cold. It is also served with strips of beef, half a hard-boiled egg and/or vegetables.

**Kim** This is seaweed, sometimes wrapped around vegetables and seasoned rice to make kim bap, a common item to take on picnics.

**Mandoo** These small dumplings, filled with delicious vegetables and meat, are served in a hot soup [man doo gook], fried [goon man doo] or steamed [jjin man doo].

**Bee Bim Bap** A large bowl is filled with rice, small piles of colorful vegetables are layered on top, and a barely cooked egg placed to one side. Customarily, a generous amount of red hot pepper paste is added to the bowl and then mixed with the other contents.

**Bulgogi** These are thin strips of beef that have been marinated in soy sauce, garlic, green onions and sugar, then barbecued--often right at your table. You may wrap bulgogi and red bean paste inside lettuce.

**Galbi** These are barbecued beef ribs, prepared in a similar way to bulgogi.

**Galbi Chim** This can be described as a beef rib casserole. The beef is seasoned as it is in kalbi, simmered with carrots, mushrooms, chestnuts, and potatoes.

## **Acceptable public conduct**

Third party introductions are usually preferred, so wait to be introduced to another at gatherings and parties.

The junior person will be the first to bow. The senior person will be the first to offer his hand. A weak handshake or nod of the head may be sufficient in business circles.

South Korean men greet each other with a slight bow, and sometimes an accompanying handshake, while maintaining eye contact, unless there's a significant hierarchy between the two. In handshaking, your right forearm is often supported by the left hand.

In South Korean business culture, professional women also shake hands. Western women will have to initiate a handshake with Korean men, unless a Korean man is higher than their status. In that case, he will initiate a handshake.

Elderly people are highly respected, so it is polite to greet and speak to them first, then spend a few minutes with them.

Complimenting an elder's good health is always appreciated.

You may also show respect towards older people or seniors by passing objects such as food or documents with both hands.

Bow at the beginning and end of a meeting.

For seasoned international business professionals, eye contact is important to indicate your sincerity and attentiveness to the speaker. However, some Koreans have difficulty in maintaining steady eye contact with an authority figure. Some men may also avoid eye contact with women.

Gestures such as touching someone on the back or on the person's arm are discouraged unless the individuals are friends and peers. Physical contact is inappropriate with older people, people of the opposite sex, or people who are not good friends or family. One exception, however, is that people of the same sex often hold hands.

When talking or laughing, keep your voice as quiet as possible.

Criticism of any kind should be done in private.

Like anyone else, South Koreans laugh when something is funny. Don't assume, however, that a smile is always an indication of amusement or approval. It can be used to mask embarrassment and other feelings of distress.

Feet are perceived as dirty and should not touch other people or objects. Men should take care that the soles of their shoes are pointing down. Don't cross legs in front of an authority figure in an open sitting environment.

Blowing your nose in public is considered vulgar. If heavily spiced Korean food makes your nose run, turn aside and blow it quietly. It will be even better to get up and move away from the table before blowing your nose.

You may beckon someone younger and junior by extending your arm with a palm down and moving your fingers up and down. Beckoning a person by moving an index finger toward you is considered very rude.

Cover your mouth when yawning or using a toothpick.

If the Korean national anthem is played in a public place, stand at attention out of respect.

You will probably see people on the street wearing surgical masks. They are wearing these masks when they have a cold. They are trying not to spread germs.