

# Good Morning and Good Evening!

Time zones, language barriers, and cultural differences create barriers to effective communication between U.S. employees and their counterparts and business contacts in Asia. Here are 12 tips that will help ensure better, more efficient communication.

As more and more U.S. companies establish operations in Asia or partner with companies in the region, communication between U.S. and Asian employees becomes a crucial factor for success. And because trade is so prolific and cooperation is so intense, that communication is no longer limited to a select group of employees. It has become commonplace at all levels of the organizational hierarchy.

Beyond the expected cultural and language barriers, the geographical distance between the U.S. and Asia creates difficulty. Reductions in travel budgets makes it likely that many U.S. and Asian employees and contacts will be unable to meet in person—forcing them to build relationships through means other than face-to-face contact. The difference in time zones also leaves little, if any, window for direct communication during normal business hours.

Given these limitations, asynchronous communication is the

prevailing method of interaction, with e-mail as the primary means. But communicating this way can slow down decision making and problem resolution to an unacceptable pace. Without working outside of normal business hours, the communication loop will be at least 12 hours. And because communication is often impaired by language and cultural challenges, it can take several communication loops to bring an issue to closure. The result is that direct interaction remains a vital and critical need.

## Tips for Efficient Communication

Because of the differences in time zones, “Good morning and good evening” has become a standard greeting on conference calls involving participants in the U.S. and Asia. Given the many limitations and restrictions, it becomes essential to conduct synchronous communication as efficiently as possible. The following suggestions may help you make the most out of a telephone conversation or online conference with your counterparts.

**1. Be respectful of time commitments and acknowledge the extra effort.** Being late for after-hour meetings is rude because it cuts into employees’ free and fam-

ily time even more than already necessary. Being repeatedly late can lead to such a level of aggravation that it negatively impacts the whole working relationship.

Thank your counterparts for making themselves available in their free time. Very often, the burden of working after hours is skewed toward the U.S. participants, so if you’re a manager whose employees frequently deal with Asia, be sure to recognize their extra efforts.

## **2. Set your expectations right and plan for additional time.**

Calls held at odd hours with participants from non-Western cultures who don’t speak English as their first language will take longer and be less efficient than similar communications with a member of the same cultural background who speaks the same language as you.

**3. Choose the best communication medium available.** Use landlines wherever possible. International cell phone discussions typically offer the lowest audio quality. Internet telephony services may be cheaper, but they often have inferior sound or longer delays. Discourage participants to access the conference call via cell phones and speaker phones.

**4. Use a reliable conference call service for discussions with more than two participants.** A good conference call service offers local, often toll-free access numbers for participants from all regions, lowering the participation barriers for all participants. Check whether the conference call service has sufficient lines for the country that you are working with. A service that works great within the United States may not be the best option for international phone calls.

**5. Augment your call with a Web conference.** Supplementing the telephone conversation with an onscreen presentation reduces the chance for misunderstanding. If the language barriers are particularly severe, try to summarize the most important points by providing real-time meeting minutes in a file that both sides can access while the call is in progress. You may also want to type keywords and technical terms into a file that participants can access during the call.

**6. Speak simple and straightforward English and enunciate clearly.** Be mindful that English most likely isn't your counterparts' first language. Also remember that it's possible they learned British—and not American—English. Even technical language from the same field may differ, e.g., “stock” vs. “inventory” and “turnover” vs. “sales.”

**7. Avoid colloquialisms and slang.** Americans love to use sports-related expressions during business discussions, but phrases such as “ballpark numbers,” “questions from left field,” and “slam dunk” will often not be understood by those from other cultures and countries.

**8. Stay away from politics and jokes.** While the willingness to discuss politics differs from country to country, it's generally a good idea to stay away from the topic. Also be very careful with jokes. There's a good chance they will be misunderstood or misinterpreted. It's very possible that your colleagues won't understand that you're trying to be humorous. On the other hand, the ability to share jokes in an international conference call with Asian participants is a barometer for how far you have advanced your mastery of international communication and the extent to which you have built a working relationship.

### Be respectful and avoid being overly confrontational or putting someone on the spot.

**9. Be cognizant of the cultural aspects of your communication.** In many Asian countries, saying “Yes” may simply mean “I am listening” and not signal agreement. A lot of Asian cultures feel significantly more comfortable with silence, using it to prepare a good answer. This can lead to odd situations in conference calls with Americans who are typically not accustomed to sustained silences. It's also important to avoid “losing face” situations. Be respectful and avoid being overly confrontational or putting someone on the spot.

**10. Avoid similarity traps.** Because of long-standing Chinese influence and the size of its population and economy, China has become the most visible trade partner for the U.S. While there are many similarities among Asian cultures, be cognizant of similarity traps that arise from assuming that all Asians must be like the Chinese.

**11. Respect local holidays.** Asian holidays follow a significantly different pattern than in the Western world. Keeping this in mind can be crucial when discussing deadlines or deliverables. Overall, become familiar with other aspects of your counterparts' culture(s).

**12. Use appropriate active listening skills.** Paraphrase the statements of your counterpart and ask for clarification. Ask questions for clarification where necessary. From time to time, summarize what your counterpart is saying.

**Seizing Opportunities**  
Following these recommendations will help you make your intercontinental communication more effective and more efficient. Once you have achieved a sufficient level of communication, start thinking about how you can move beyond overcoming the challenges of U.S.-Asian communication and move toward seizing the opportunities of intercontinental cooperation—becoming a transcontinental work team that operates around the clock and gets things accomplished twice as fast as a team located only on one continent. **SF**

### Seizing Opportunities

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