

WITH EUROPE IN DISARRAY, US RELATIONSHIPS ARE EVER MORE CRUCIAL. MAKE SURE YOU KNOW THE RULES - AND DON'T FALL FOR THE MYTHS, SAYS ENGLISHMAN IN AMERICA, **LEON WALKER**

U.S. & U.S.

On the eve of an American tour, former Oasis frontman and perennial fraternal antagonist Liam Gallagher refused to board the band's US-bound plane, leaving the band to tour without a lead singer. Consequently the Mancunian Britpoppers' US career went the same way as 99% of UK bands: straight to the bargain bin.

Gallagher had assumed that because Oasis were a successful band in the UK, their formula would also add up to success in America, irrespective of his absence.

Wrong, Our Kid. Americans, unlike their British cousins, value hard work much higher than talent. And Gallagher was a no-show. Screw him.

"There's a belief in the US that grafting will somehow get you somewhere even if you're just spinning your wheels getting deeper and deeper in the mud,"

says Allyson Stewart-Allen, a Californian international business consultant and co-author of *Working with Americans: How to Build Profitable Business Relationships*.

Stewart-Allen has lived and worked in the UK for more than 20 years and made a career picking apart the little differences between these "two nations divided by a common language".

I have gone the other way. I began my journalistic career in London before moving to the world media hub that is Denver, Colorado to start a new life with my American wife. In the three years since I switched sides of the Atlantic, the cultural differences have, for me, come into sharp relief. So how do British businesses avoid such Gallagher-style faux pas when dealing with America? You can begin by looking at respective work cultures - "spinning

one's wheels in the mud" is just the start of it.

"Americans seem ashamed to say they're taking a vacation, while Brits will very proudly say they're going on holiday so they'll 'Get back to you next month'," says a financial manager at a US-based sports marketing firm with offices in the UK. This can cause problems when dealing with long-term projects.

A study conducted in 2000 by analysts Accenture found that 83% of US office workers stayed in contact with work while on holiday for a week or more. Contrast that with the meek phone call you got from your boss last bank holiday apologising for bothering you on your day off and the difference becomes clear.

"What we Americans find strange is the rarity of proper handovers in the UK," says Stewart-Allen. "The whole world stops because this



person has gone on holiday. We want continuity of service.”

It is impossible to write an article like this without referencing a few stereotypes. But stereotyping Americans is a major pitfall of which many Brits fall foul. Given that the European Union is in a mess and David Cameron has reached out again to the US in his recent talks with President Barack Obama, it is imperative that you don't lazily accept US stereotypes. You may soon need my adopted countrymen.

Stereotyping Britain – a tightly packed island nation, 60 million strong – is an entirely different concept to stereotyping our American cousins. There are 300 million Americans spread from sea to shining sea, across what can more accurately be described as a continent than a country. To put the mismatch of scale into context, the UK is slightly smaller than Wyoming, the US's 11th-largest – and least populous – state.

Consider: “Americans drink about eight cups of coffee a day,” as I overheard a Tube commuter say on a recent trip back to London. Despite being woefully inaccurate, this suggests that the jugs of Joe downed by a metropolitan New Yorker are equivalent, and in any way relevant, to the standard caffeine intake of an Oregonian lumberjack. The wildly variable coffee consumption rates are a flippant illustration of America's



structural diversity: due to the federated nature of the government, even laws differ fundamentally from one side of a state line to the other.

“People from the UK tend to view the US as one big single market,” says Rhian Chilcott, a Brit who runs the CBI's International Directorate in Washington, DC. “In fact, there are lots of different and rules and regulations [that vary from state to state].”

Yet perhaps the biggest so-called myth about dealing with Americans is based on a truth. The truth is that Americans, as a general rule, are forward and friendly – sometimes alarmingly so – to complete strangers. To our cynical British ears

this gregarious disposition often comes across as an act – all a bit fake and superficial. *That* is the myth.

Americans tend to look on the bright side in most situations and are, usually, generous to a fault. They treat any hint of cynicism or self-depreciation in much the same way that we Brits treat their seemingly endless positivity – with suspicion. So be warned: while a little self-effacing humility may serve you well east of the Atlantic, avoid poking fun at yourself when doing business west of it. You may come across as lacking a “can do” attitude – this is a severe no-no Stateside.

As well as showing that you respect yourself, in some quarters,

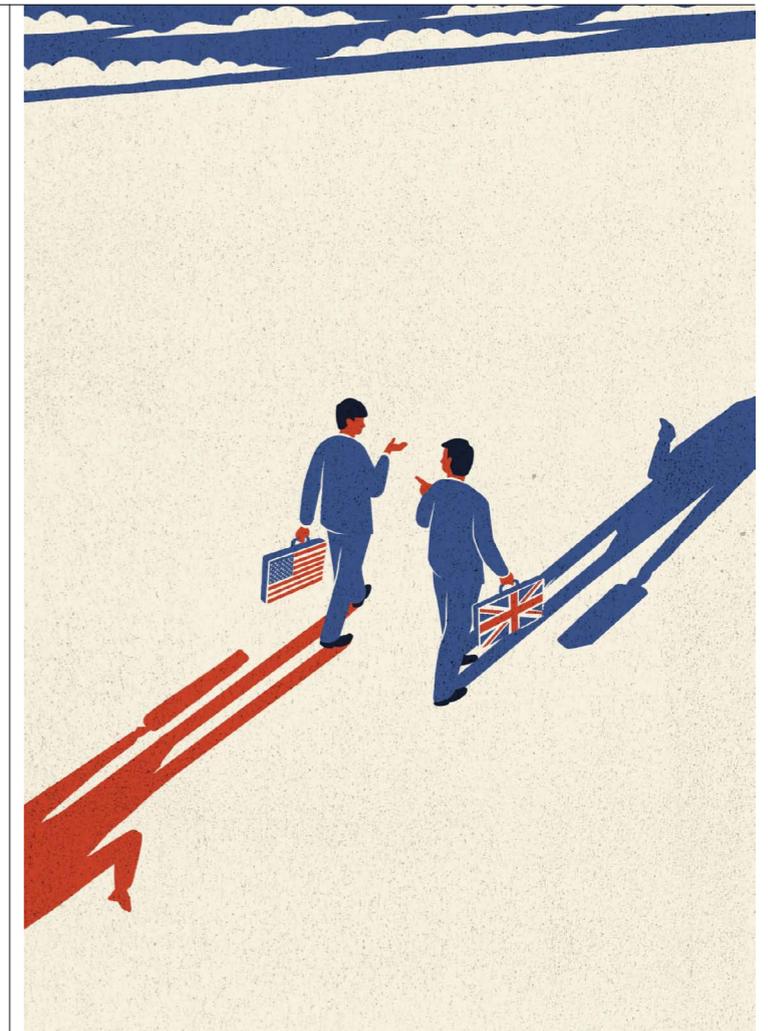
you must ensure you respect even notional seniority too. Nowhere is this more apparent than when dealing with the elected class.

“British businesses are often amazed by the level of deference shown to American politicians,” says Chilcott. “There is a degree of formality that you'd never get in the UK.”

Given that the US is a country that seemingly dislikes its politicians and government more than pretty much anything else, being irreverent with politicians is an easy trap to fall into. But all the “Yes senator, no senator, three bags full senator” is standard practice in Washington's smoke-filled rooms: treat these fellas like you might your local MP when complaining about lackadaisical refuse collection and you may find yourself less “Steve Jobs”, more “No Jobs”.

However, as discussed already, to generalise about the whole country would be misleading. Formality and strict hierarchy are still the norm in politics and traditional corporate America. Yet, in some sectors, informality rules.

The boom in internet-based firms has led to an increase in casually dressed workplaces where the emphasis is on actually adding



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heritage is drawn from are probably more important to everyday American life than Blighty. As such, do not expect the old country's presumed US cultural ties to get you a foot in the door.

But don't fret. Perhaps the most important thing to remember is that despite the differences, the two countries' cultures and business processes are quite similar.

“The distinctions exist if you want to find them,” says Chilcott. “In terms of business, it's less than you'd think. The US is probably more similar than any other country UK businesses deal with.”

So you'll be fine. Just remember to never take holiday, know exactly what region you are dealing with, be prepared to be super-formal – and super-informal, and accept that your nationality might not do you any favours. Having said that, your accent probably will. It got me a wife.

THREE NON-MYTHS ABOUT AMERICANS

NOT EVERYTHING YOU'VE LEARNED ABOUT THE US IS WRONG. THESE ARE RIGHT.

♣ Industriousness

Americans are famed for their “Protestant work ethic”. Not to say that Europeans don't work hard. But Americans do work differently. Spending an afternoon, or even a holiday (vacation), with an American can be an exhausting experience as it quickly dawns on your British mind that these guys must always be *doing something*. The same is true of their work culture: days off are scarce compared to Europe, and even then many employees don't take their allotted time. And simply being at work often appears to be just as highly regarded by Americans as actually being productive.

♣ Parochialism

This is a hard one to explain without sounding mean, but many American citizens really don't have much knowledge of the world outside America. To explain this – without excusing it – we need to put it into context. The US is huge, and, at least for a while – sorry China! – the most important country in the world. You probably know more about US news and politics than the average American knows about Britain. But can you say the same about Poland or New Zealand? Probably not: their news doesn't affect you, and, I'm sorry to say it Britain, most of your news doesn't affect America. My adopted country does, however, obsess over our royal family.

♣ Directness

Often interpreted as rudeness by our sensitive British ears, Americans – and, in my experience, citizens of a host of other ex-British colonies – deal with things in a matter-of-fact way. Take it on the chin. It is not offensive; this is business. A former American colleague of mine continually expressed annoyance at Brits pointing out his directness in business meetings, regularly retorting, half-jokingly: “As opposed to the British, who never say what they mean and leave everything open to interpretation.” A little harsh, perhaps, but there's some truth in there.

value rather than appearing to do so – or spinning those wheels. Chilcott tells a story where a UK chairman was meeting the chief executive of a large Californian Silicon Valley company: “The CEO wandered into the room unannounced,” she recalls. “The chairman saw this shaggy, unkempt bloke enter the room, assumed he was there to replenish the refreshments and asked him for some tea!”

Know who you are meeting – and be diplomatic about dress codes. But don't necessarily expect the UK's given rules of international diplomacy to apply in the US. And you might as well forget about the so-called “special relationship”.

I met my wife, a Marylander, at university in London. Through conversations we spent forming our own special relationship, it became increasingly clear that its diplomatic namesake was at best one-sided and, more likely, nonexistent.

Stewart-Allen says that while Americans would agree there is a certain closeness between the two countries, they're more likely to think the term refers to President Barack Obama and his wife Michelle than the US and its former colonial paymasters. Opinion polls regularly cite Canada as being seen as more favourable to Americans than the UK. Israel, China and whichever country a particular person's