

ruthlessly. Some Canadian companies operating in the Netherlands find that they have to go to some length to convince potential employees that they are nice companies. However, presenting the company as an international company has a positive appeal.

English is widely spoken. Unlike other European countries, it is easy to hire linguists without paying a premium. Most business can be conducted in English. There is no need to learn Dutch, as nobody will expect foreigners to speak Dutch.

There is a tradition of skilled workers. The Netherlands offers manufacturing companies a tradition of skilled manual workers who compete well with other European countries. However, some Canadian companies thought that the productivity level was lower in the Netherlands compared with elsewhere, almost to the point of deterring them from setting up a manufacturing plant there.

The Netherlands is a logistical centre for Europe. The Netherlands has often been chosen as a set-up base by companies who need access to the French and German market and need a warehousing and distribution facility to serve Europe. The Dutch market itself is very small. The transport and communication structure is excellent. Rotterdam, vying with New York as the largest harbour in the world, is at the mouth of the Rhine, the most navigated river in the world. In addition, Schiphol is an established international airport. Road links are excellent too, with a good highway network allowing easy access to France and Germany.

The business culture is relatively informal. The importance of contractual agreements in the Netherlands can be rated as between France and Germany. Most agreements will be concluded with a written contract, but it is not unusual to make orders via the telephone and the facsimile.

Personal relations in a business context are quite similar to the United Kingdom and first names are easily used. Although the Dutch language has a formal address like French and German, its misuse is never discussed as very few foreigners speak Dutch, and the problem is solved by using the neutral English address.

Costs are higher than in Canada. Warehousing, salaries and personal taxes are higher than in Canada.

Labour laws are very protectionist of workers' rights and are very generous regarding employees' benefits, such as maternity leave. Therefore, the overall staffing costs can be considerably higher than in Canada. A practice that can cause friction with a Canadian head office is Dutch executives living a few hundred kilometres from their office. This is because of the high cost of housing transfer. Dutch law gives them the right to have the cost of public transport reimbursed.

Market data are available. The business culture in this field is more akin to North America and the United Kingdom. Market data are produced by a number of research companies and you can easily make enquiries in a given market.

Selling methods vary. Trade fairs are a useful marketing tool in the Netherlands and the rest of Europe. However, according to some Canadian companies in the Netherlands, direct mailing does not produce good results and salespeople have to call on potential customers and take them to lunch.

Specifications are tighter and deadlines stricter than in Canada. Canadian companies in the Netherlands found that specifications of products ordered tended to be more precise than in Canada. Similarly, delivery deadlines were expected to be respected. This is much less flexible than in Canada.