# Working with the Dutch — a guide for US entrepreneurs

*Cox360 — W.Th.H. Cox RA*

*September 2026*

You will do business in the Netherlands in English. Your Dutch counterpart switches to it before you ask, and the first few meetings feel entirely straightforward.

The difficulty is that a fluent conversation hides different expectations. You leave the meeting pleased with the possibilities; the other person may leave believing you have made a decision.

## Enthusiasm is heard as agreement

*“This looks great”*, *“we should absolutely do that”* and *“let me get you something next week”* keep a conversation moving while the decision is still being considered. People used to your way of speaking know how much commitment those words carry.

A Dutch listener takes them at face value. Time is booked, work begins, a colleague is told the project is going ahead. If you then decide against it, you discover that the other side thought the decision had already been made.

You do not need to become less enthusiastic. Add what happens next: *“I like the proposal. I still need approval from my partners, so please hold off on starting.”*

The reverse causes as much trouble, because Dutch approval sounds like indifference. *“Prima”* and *“niet slecht”*, fine and not bad, are favourable verdicts from most speakers, though not from all. If you need a definite answer, ask for one.

## An objection arrives plainly

A Dutch adviser will tell you that your figures are wrong, without preparation or reassurance. It sounds harsher than it was meant.

Ask what needs correcting before you decide what the tone meant. The discussion usually turns practical the moment you reach the calculation or the assumption behind the objection.

You will also find less deference to seniority than you expect. A junior colleague questions a partner's view in the meeting, and in many organisations that is an ordinary part of working the problem through.

None of this makes every blunt remark reasonable. It does mean that tone and rank give you fewer clues here than they do at home.

## Find out who needs to agree

Dutch organisations consult a good many people before committing. From outside it is hard to tell whether a proposal is progressing or has stalled.

Rather than asking repeatedly for an answer, ask who has to be involved and when their input is due. Establish whether the person you are speaking to can commit, or is still collecting views.

That is more useful than assuming an encouraging meeting will produce a signed agreement, and it gives you a basis for planning your own work.

## Holidays and availability need planning

Some years ago my wife and I spent three weeks on the Gulf coast of Florida. The length of the stay surprised several of the Americans we met, and when I mentioned that I had forty-five days of annual leave, the conversation tended to pause.

That was my own arrangement rather than a description of every Dutch employment contract. It did bring home how far the expectations differ.

A colleague taking two or three consecutive weeks off here is unremarkable. Part-time contracts are common, including in senior roles, so the person handling your project may well not work on a particular weekday.

Ask about availability early, especially if a deadline falls in the summer or around Christmas. Agree who covers an absence and which decisions have to be made beforehand.

Weekends work the same way. A Saturday email will be answered on Monday. If you need urgent matters handled outside working hours, agree how that will work instead of relying on the email being seen.

For employers there is a separate practical point. Dutch rules on holiday pay, sickness and other leave differ substantially from what you are used to in the United States. As a headline example, an employer will generally have to continue paying at least 70% of an employee’s wages during sickness for up to 104 weeks; contracts or collective agreements can require more. Have those obligations priced before you take on staff. They belong in the budget as much as in the employment contract.

## Do not judge a contract by its length

A Dutch commercial agreement is much shorter than the American document you would use for the same transaction. That is a reason to ask questions rather than a conclusion about its quality.

Ask your legal adviser which matters are dealt with by the applicable law and which have to be written in. Check the provisions that matter to your transaction: late payment, failed delivery, and how the relationship ends.

Be ready to explain the purpose of the provisions in your own draft as well. Wording that passes without comment at home prompts questions here.

## Make room for the language

Your Dutch counterpart has worked in English for years. Following a fast discussion between several native speakers still takes concentration that you are not spending.

The quietest traps are the words that exist in both languages. *Eventueel* means possibly, not eventually. *Actueel* means current, not actual. The *mutaties* on a bank account are its transactions, not mutations, and a *rekening* is an account or an invoice rather than a calculation. *Controle* is an audit. *Provisie* is commission, while a *voorziening* is a provision.

Put together, a confident email reads: *Eventually I will send you the actual mutations on the account, so that we can control the provision.* Every word is English and none of it carries the meaning intended. He means he might send the current transactions so the provision can be audited.

Slow down when the subject gets complicated, and recap the decisions briefly. If a sentence strikes you as odd, ask about it rather than reading intent into it. And ask what is still open rather than asking whether everything is clear, which invites a yes.

You are working in your own language and the other person is working in his second or third. A little extra clarity is what makes both of you leave the meeting with the same understanding.

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