

Business in Hawaii is the Same, but Totally Different



Executive Summary. Business in Hawaii is just like in other states, but yet so different. Read on for your guide to doing business in Hawaii.

Kama`aina status. Kama`aina (pronounced "kaa-ma-eye-na") is a Hawaiian word used to describe someone originally from Hawaii, or someone who has been living in Hawaii long enough to be considered a "local" person. I'd say one is unofficially kama`aina after twenty (20) years of living in Hawaii. As I've been here almost 22 years, I guess I'm qualified to write this article.

If you don't like it, leave. No one has ever said that to me (I've said it to others), but if you don't like the way things are done here, you should just leave. The culture here is figuratively and literally halfway between Japan and the Lower 48 which means that decisions are generally made often by committee and oftentimes follow an *authority gradient* (as seen in the medical industry) wherein the final decision is left to the senior official.

Welcome to 1967. I arrived in Hawaii in 2001 as a project manager for a heavy/civil construction project and upon my arrival at the project site, the mechanic asked "you ever been here before?" I said "no" and he responded with "well, welcome to 1967". Things then were done differently and driven by tradition and paper, moreso than efficiency and technology. I remember when I got here and had to get my driver's license the test was using paper and pencil – they sell the study guide in the local drug store chain still, I believe.

Business attire. Don't ever wear a tie. Unless you're in court. Do wear an aloha shirt to casual events and even to the formal events. The casual events, like being a project manager on a construction project can be jeans and an aloha shirt. If you have a formal event, wear slacks and a nicer silk-like aloha shirt.

Hawaiian time. It's a fact, people arrive late. Not always. Anytime you have an informal function, no one arrives on time. They arrive on Hawaiian time – which is a bit later. However, don't let this happen for business meetings. If you're the newbie, get there five minutes early.

Eating and greeting. People who live in Hawaii love to eat. When you come to visit, they will want to take you out. And pay. Let them. But don't forget to reciprocate. You may hear someone ask you next time around for your kokua. This is a Hawaiian word meaning "give help" which somewhat relates to reciprocating, but not exactly. One of the best ways to reciprocate is to bring in food to a meeting: malasadas or manapua. The first is a sugary pastry from Portugal and the second is a bun with char siu (a barbecued pork) in it; pork hash and hot mustard is a nice adder to the manapua delivery too. If you really want to hit a home run, bring your local food specialty over on the plane (make sure it travels well!).

Greeting can be dicey. Hugs and kisses on the cheek are customary for greeting women. It seems unprofessional to a mainlander who thrives on the strong handshake, but any woman you've known for a meeting or two you should probably give a hug and cheek kiss to. Regarding the men, the handshake is not a mainland handshake – it's a sports hand-clasp which shifts into a handshake. It's not complicated, but you'll want to see it done before you try it.

Things take time. From here in Hawaii, we know that developing business relationships in Japan can take decades. It's not much different here. People who have been here their entire life, or for decades, know that many folks come over from the mainland, accomplish their business at any cost, and head back. For this reason, there can be skepticism on those from other places.

The haole myth. Haole (pronounced "how-lee") refers, by definition, to someone who is not a native of Hawaii. It can be derogatory, in some settings, but the vast majority of times it's just meant to identify someone as a Caucasian. The term *haole* for Caucasians is really no different than someone saying "oh yeah, he was an Asian guy" for Asians. Most of Hawaii is "Asian or in combination" per the United States Census Bureau.



The 9th island. If you want to immediately bond with probably 75% of business folk on the island, talk about Las Vegas. There are eight islands in the chain of Hawaiian Islands. People here love Vegas so much, we call it the 9th island.

Slow down, this ain't the mainland. This is a bumper sticker I see once in awhile on the highway. It's true. If you're coming from Los Angeles or anywhere in the Northeast, you're in for a rude awakening. Things here can take longer than you're used to. Not just the traffic speed is slow. Getting a contractor's license here takes about 5 to 14 months.



"Hoptoe", not "backhoe" in Hawaii.

My story. When I arrived in 2001, I thought I was pretty knowledgeable. Then I immediately felt like an idiot when someone said "we'll dig it with the hoptoe..." "The 'what' I said?" Well, hoptoe is the local word for backhoe. Here I was, top talent from the Pacific Northwest and I didn't know how to dig a 24" trench.

I wrote this article because I was laughing outloud to myself the other night at an industry event. One of the local union chapters here (by the way, this is a very strong union environment) had their annual banquet. I was a guest of a dear friend who brought her haole friend (me) to sit with her work friends, one of which she went to high school with (Tip: it's all about high school here and where you went, so if you didn't go to high school here, you're down a point already!). I got to the table first because I went for the more traditional foods: prime rib, potatoes, an veggies. My friend got in the 100-person long sushi line because "that's what we do here Scott, us locals line up for miles to get the sushi". The event went on until 9pm or so until it broke up and I stayed a few more minutes with my friend. And then a few minutes later, two banquet tables over, the 8-foot round table turned into a Vegas casino floor. It looked like a craps pit. Women in high heels and elegant dresses alongside men with outdated kinda-dress pants and boots. It was a makeshift speakeasy event in the Ala Moana Hotel! You had to be there, it was hilarious!



"Rubbish", not "trash" in Hawaii.

Of all the things that I've learned here, here more than anywhere else, it is vital to do what you say. On the mainland when we say "I'll get that done later today", it can mean later today or maybe tomorrow some time, but soon. Here in Hawaii (and I still screw it up), it is as serious as cancer. If you want to do business here, do what you say. Period.

Also, know that you should *Never mistake Aloha for weakness*. That's another bumper sticker too, but very good advice.

Work safe!