

## An international Post Code Primer

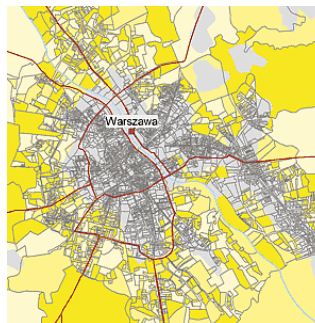
Graham Rhind, GfK MACON's business partner from the Netherlands, is giving you a survey on the various post code systems in the world.

Most of us are familiar with the postal code system of the country in which we live and work. But can we apply that knowledge to postal code systems in other countries? Some 180 countries and territories have postal code systems, and this article provides a primer for understanding them.

There are some 240 countries and territories in the world, so clearly the first myth to be dispelled is that all countries have a postal code system. Because this is not widely known, most companies with an Internet presence make postal code a required field in any data collection forms on their sites. This makes online shopping difficult for anybody having an address which doesn't contain a postal code. The British Overseas Territory of Tristan da Cunha was recently assigned a postal code by Royal Mail because the inhabitants were not able to order products on the Internet without them, and this has also been given as a reason for the planned introduction of a postal code system into Ireland.

Postal code systems differ greatly in their form and structure. They may include capital letters, numbers, spaces and punctuation – again, many companies are not prepared for these differences. The longest postal code currently in use in the world is 10 digits. They may include an indicator of geographic location within the code, or it may have been created in another way entirely, such as alphabetically on the basis of place or province name.

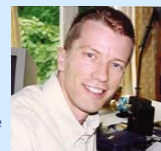
Postal codes usually, though not always, have a geographic component as almost all of them point to a geographical delivery point, be it a building, a company, a post office box, an area or a postal route. A single code may cover a whole country or territory. In other cases each code may cover a place or group of places, streets, parts of streets; or coverage may be as fine as single buildings or companies. In some countries the coverage of each postal code is similar, for example a fixed number of buildings. In others, the coverage may differ in urban and rural areas. In some countries every part of the country is covered. In others, though a notional code may exist, postal codes may not cover uninhabited areas.



An important factor, often overlooked, is that, self evidently, postal codes have been created to expedite the delivery of post and not for any other reason. Though in a small number of countries there is a clear agreement between postal code and administrative districts such as provinces, this is rarely the case. Postal code areas may be jagged in form as they often follow postal delivery routes, and those postal code areas mesh together in a complex network. In many cases, areas with the same postal code are not contiguous and have several centroids. This being the case, a postal code route can commence in one province and end in another. The many companies looking for one-to-one matches between province name and postal code district will never find that Eldorado.

### About the author:

Graham Rhind is an acknowledged expert in the field of data management. He runs his own data consultancy company, GRC Database Information, in The Netherlands, (<http://www.grcdi.nl>) where he researches postal codes and addressing systems, collates international data, runs a busy postal link website and writes data management software. Graham also regularly speaks on the subject and is the author of *Building and Maintaining a European Direct Marketing Database*, *The Global Sourcebook of Address Data Management*.



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