The first time, they kept him waiting for 14 days before returning the paperwork with the required stamp on it. The businessman in Ho Chi Minh City had learnt his lesson.

The next time he submitted the paperwork to a government agency in Hanoi for the stamp, he placed among the documents an envelope with US$20 in it. This time he got a call almost immediately. Just go to the office, he was told. He would have a room with the paperwork and the stamp, and “you can do whatever you want.”

“I was not expecting things to be that easy. Just an envelope. But that was it. It is a matter of fact thing,” the businessman told Vietweek on condition of anonymity.

In fact, the practice of giving and receiving under-the-table money is actually so common that it is not even considered bribery, but an intrinsic part of local business culture, evoking no guilt either in the giver or the taker.

So the results of a new study released Tuesday (October 16) by the Development and Policies Research Center, a Hanoi-based think tank, have failed to raise eyebrows.

Seventy percent of companies in Hanoi, Hai Phong and Son La, the other locality surveyed in the report, said they had bribed government officials to get things done, saying they have only become “increasingly professional” in taking bribes over the years.

“They have set up their own unwritten rules that fix (bribery) rates for every single procedure,” Lam said. “And we the companies consider paying bribes a routine part of their daily lives,” said Hoang Nhu Lam, who runs a ceramics business in a southern province.

He cited the example of the customs department, listed as one of the most corruption-prone agencies, saying they have only become “increasingly professional” in taking bribes over the years.

“In 2009, the World Bank commissioned report in 2010 summed it up: ‘If firms adapt to corruption to the extent that it becomes normal and less of a problem, … it becomes even harder to eradicate.’

Lam, the ceramics businessman, was unimpressed by the call not to bribe officials. He said those making the call were not walking in the shoes of businesses, and would never empathize with them.

“Only when stricter laws are imposed to punish the officials who take bribes and only when they get decent salaries will there be a hope of ending the practice,” he said.

“Otherwise, we can stop paying bribes provided that the customs officials become programmed robots, not the human beings they currently are.”

People queue up at the main Ho Chi Minh City tax office. Giving gifts in cash or kind to express gratitude to government officials is seen as a normal business practice in Vietnam.