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WHAT ARE JAPANESE EMPLOYERS LOOKING FOR?

INTRODUCTION

When MBA/MIM students look for a position in an American or a Japanese company, they must fulfill extra criteria. What are some important qualities that the candidate should possess when a job requires dealing with Japanese businesspeople?

To answer this question, the authors interviewed two Americans in business who received job offers and distributed 29 questionnaires to Japanese businesspeople. Those questioned were 10 Thunderbird Japanese students who previously worked for Japanese companies before coming to Thunderbird, eight Japanese employees currently working for either American or Japanese companies in the Michigan area and 11 employees who are currently working for two Japanese companies in Tokyo, Japan.

A MYTH ABOUT WORKING FOR JAPANESE COMPANIES

Many MBA and/or MIM job seekers, hereafter referred to as the students, are interested in working for a Japanese company in Japan or an American company which has a joint venture with a Japanese company. If these students wish to fulfill their interest in working for a Japanese company, they are encouraged to learn the language and speak it fluently. Additionally, they want to know a great deal about Japanese business practices which, they believe, will enhance their participation in the actual business environments.

Students may be misled to the extent that, in order to speak the language fluently in the business context, they must think like the Japanese

and act like them. This is a misconception. Zimmerman (1985) states that Japanese people do not like to see Americans behave exactly as the Japanese do in business related situations.¹ This is probably because Japanese people do not expect the non-Japanese to act or think like them. R. Colfax (personal communication, February 8, 1999) supports Zimmerman's statement and explains that when non-native Japanese are "too Japanese," it makes Japanese people uncomfortable. There is a feeling of "invasion of cultural privacy."²

A Thunderbird graduate wrote a letter concerning the American mentality and Japanese mentality:

I am now thinking back on the things I learned in your class so that I can provide you with some feedback. Two things come to mind. One, your advice to us not to be too "Japanese," and that companies would hire us for being both foreign as well as for our ability to deal with our coworkers is absolutely correct. Please extend that advice to all your students who aspire to work in a Japanese company.³

The letter suggests that when students have a job interview, they should demonstrate some unique characteristics of being American; however, it is also important to let the interviewer know that they are aware of cultural differences.

Mr. Tomokuni, a Thunderbird graduate with whom one of the authors had an interview, indicates how much weight students should place on the Japanese way and/or the American way of doing things, and this depends on the types of jobs they engage in. When it comes to business negotiations, language barriers, and cross-cultural aspects of doing business with Americans, if a company does not have Japanese employees who can handle the jobs well enough, the Japanese company would ex-

¹ Mark Zimmerman, as a leading American businessman, arrived in Japan in 1977 and actively participated in establishing the economic relationship between Japan and the United States for the following four years. He was one of the few businesspeople who made great efforts to study the Japanese language and its culture and acquired a good command of Japanese.

² Dr. Richard Colfax is currently an Associate Professor of Human Resource Management and Chair of the Department of Management and Marketing at the University of Guam. He lived in Japan for 23 years (1971-1994) and worked as a business consultant to numerous firms including Nissan, Hitachi, NEC, and NTT. Dr. Colfax also worked for Sanyoo Securities as a company stock analyst in 1979-1980.

³ A personal letter written to one of the authors on February 15, 1996 by Mr. Allen Horn, a Thunderbird graduate, who works for Suzuki Motors in Hamamatsu-Shi, Shizuoka-ken, Japan.

pect perhaps up to 90 per cent or more of this type of work to be handled by the American employee(s) in an American way.

However, when it comes to other criteria, such as a sense of cooperation to work together within a section, demonstrating manners and courtesy, working overtime, and dealing with Japanese clients, the company would expect the American employee(s) to behave in a Japanese way, between 80 and 90 per cent.⁴

According to one of our experiences dealing with 25 interviews for internships and exchange programs, Japanese companies as well as American companies hire the students who can think and act like Americans, and yet who are able to understand Japanese business practices and communicate in Japanese. Therefore, when American students have a job interview, it is important that they show their flexibility in dealing with other Americans and foreigners as well as with other Japanese business practitioners.

GO BEYOND WHAT IS EXPECTED OF THE STUDENTS (JOB SEEKERS)

Based on the interviews and the results of the questionnaires, there seems to be a clear-cut gap between what the students expect and what a Japanese company requires. For example, in a cross-culturally based value system, what is considered to be very important to Japanese companies may not be interpreted as important by students.

A case in point concerns "Judy," an American woman, who was asked to come to a trade show location for her first interview. The company wished to show Judy an important part of her job, which is dealing with Japanese clients. She arrived twenty-five minutes earlier than her original appointment time. To the Japanese company employers, her coming to see them early already implied that she was taking the job interview seriously and would like to work for that company. As a result, the employers were very impressed by her early arrival.⁵

When Judy finished the first interview, she was requested to have the second interview at the headquarters in Tokyo within a month. Throughout the month, she waited for a telephone call from the headquarters, but

⁴Interview with Mr. Yasuhiro Tomokuni in Glendale, Arizona on January 27, 1999. Mr. Tomokuni has been working for the Osaka Municipal Office for 13 years and received the Rotary Scholarship in 1997 to attend Thunderbird, the American Graduate School of International Management in Glendale, Arizona.

⁵One of the authors had a personal interview in February, 1996 with a Thunderbird student who used to work for a trading company in Tokyo, Japan.

no word came. She repeatedly called the headquarters. Finally, the personnel manager said that he would call her the following week. Judy truly wanted a job offer from this company because it would provide a great opportunity for her future career. To the Japanese way of thinking, Judy's persistent phone calls implied to the personnel manager that she was highly motivated and wished to work for the company. Consequently, the personnel manager, vice president of sales, and the president were very impressed by Judy's persistent follow-ups.

A similar case took place when a Japanese automobile company established a plant in Ohio. Many American workers filled out applications hoping that they would be hired to work on the assembly lines. Four months passed, and many American workers who had filled out applications still had not received a response. Some American workers went to the office, asking what happened to their job applications. The Japanese personnel manager explained that the personnel department was still in the process of screening the candidates, so it would take two more months. As soon as the American workers left the office, the manager pulled out the workers' files and marked the applications of the workers who came back twice. To the Japanese personnel office, the marked applications indicated how serious the American workers were with respect to their future jobs.

STUDENTS' MISCONCEPTIONS OF WHAT A PROSPECTIVE COMPANY WANTS FROM THEM

Students' image of what they consider to be good candidates may differ from what Japanese employers are seeking. When asked, students often feel that the most important categories are: 1) job experience, 2) knowledge of a special field such as accounting, finance, marketing, 3) knowledge of cross-cultural aspects, 4) language, 5) communication, 6) ability to perform jobs, 7) facing pressure.

However, the results of the 29 questionnaires indicate that the following, in order of greatest importance, are what the Japanese felt should be considered when filling a job position. The questionnaires were distributed to Japanese students on the Thunderbird Campus in 1995 and 1996, to Japanese employees who worked for American companies and Japanese subsidiaries in the Michigan area in 1996, and to employees of two Japanese companies in Tokyo, Japan in February 1996. The smaller the total number, the more important the criterion.

Rank	Criteria	Thunder- bird Campus (10)	Michigan Area (8)	Two Japanese Companies (11)	Total (29)
1	personality	31	14	23	68
2	character	32	15	27	74
3	rapport/ cooperation	41	24	42	107
4	adaptability	43	37	45	125
5	special field	51	37	43	131
6	job experience	56	35	46	137
7	language	46	50	52	148
8	motivation	62	49	67	178
9	education	85	49	83	217
10	Japanese culture	74	55	101	230
11	grade	114	52	96	262
12	student life	110	76	97	283
13	teacher's recommen- dation	108	76	106	290
14	resume	126	85	206	417

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF QUESTIONNAIRES

As one can see, there is a big gap between what the students think is important and the ideal characteristics of a student that a company wants to hire. In many cases, Japanese employers consider personality, character, and cooperation as the most important criteria. If employees have a good personality, character, and a sense of cooperation, they can perform their duties very well. In a Japanese company, the Japanese do not work alone. They will always work with their colleagues and bosses. A closer look confirms that all respondents (i.e., Thunderbird campus, Michigan area, and two Japanese companies) indicate that these characteristics are the most important ones to consider when recruiting students.

Another case revolves around "John", who applied to an American construction equipment company. Since John would be working in a joint venture setting with a major Japanese construction equipment company, the personnel manager as well as administrators of the American company wanted to make sure that John would be compatible with the Japanese. The company was adamant about finding the right person and found John with the help of a search firm after two years.⁶ The main reason why he was chosen by the company was that he had experience working for a legal office in Tokyo. There he acquired cross-cultural skills and was able to understand both Japanese and American practices so as to be able to enhance mutual understanding.

Japanese society greatly values harmony in human relationships, and working as a team is considered important. According to Fucini and Fucini (1990), a Japanese company in Michigan evaluates how well applicants can work within a group in the first step of screening them.⁷ This is quite different from the American value of "the independent thinker" (Miyamoto and Rasmussen 55). It is important to note that students need to be sensitive to the needs of others and realize that self-motivated cooperation is highly valued in Japanese society.

Judy also mentioned the importance of being a member of a group and of working with the group.⁸ The employees in the sales department had a meeting, which lasted all day. They were all exhausted. Then

⁶ One of the authors conducted a personal interview with a Thunderbird graduate who had just had a job interview with a construction equipment company in Illinois and received an offer in February, 1996.

⁷ Joseph J. Fucini and Suzy Fucini, p. 2.

⁸ Interview with Judy, a Thunderbird student in February, 1996.

someone said, "Let's go to a karaoke tonight." Judy went because she knew that whatever was not decided in the meeting probably was going to be decided at the karaoke place. Since Judy wanted to stay informed of the changes as well as give input into the decisions, she had to go along. In addition, if she did not go, it could mean that she was not interested, that it would be all right for the rest to decide. Finally, according to Judy, "it would come across bad on me because I was not working with the group. Everything goes back to the group thing."

THE JAPANESE LANGUAGE WITH RESPECT TO OPPORTUNITIES IN SECURING A POSITION

Based on the questionnaires, being able to use the language skillfully certainly stimulates the possibility of an interview. For more detailed information, please look at the appendix.

Judy said that when she went on a buying tour for cloth, some Japanese buyers said in Japanese. "Oh, this is too expensive, oh, forget this. I don't want it; the color would not fit the Japanese." When she had to convey the meanings of the utterances to the Italian manufacturer, she changed the tone of voice and said, "Excuse me sir. We've done some analysis, but we think your products are not well suited for our Japanese customers; however, if you change this design and the colors, we think we can sell a lot." By saying this, the manufacturer understood the comments and did not feel insulted.

Zimmerman (1985) maintains that "for anyone who plans to have anything to do with the Japanese that is likely to be sustained and important, not learning the language was like trying to swim upstream with only one arm."⁹ If students wish to work for a Japanese company, the ability to speak, listen, read, and write Japanese is very important. According to the questionnaires, fifty five percent of the respondents said that they agreed on this point. In Judy's case, she first received a newspaper clipping from her friend in San Francisco for a job in a trading company. The advertisement was posted in the *San Francisco Times* in English. With the help of her Japanese friend, she enclosed a Japanese resume along with her English one. Later on, after she was offered a position in the trading company, much to her surprise, she was told that over 700 students applied for the position and that she was the only per-

⁹ Mark Zimmerman, *How to do Business with the Japanese: A Strategy for Success*, p. 41.

son who sent both Japanese and English resumes. Consequently, the administration was very impressed.

If the students can function well in the workplace and can demonstrate their language abilities, the chances of a job interview will also increase, according to the questionnaire. One hundred percent of the respondents to the questionnaire said that they were willing to meet the students.

JOB INTERVIEWS

When it comes to job interviews, there is a difference between the kinds of questions that American companies and Japanese companies normally ask. As we have mentioned previously, the most important criteria in working for Japanese companies are 1) personality, 2) character, and 3) cooperation. In many cases, companies ask questions in order to gauge how open-minded, easy going, and relaxed an applicant might be, yet, questions will also be posed to find out if a student has a determined, serious and cooperative personality and character.

For example, a Japanese company might ask what extracurricular activities a student has participated in. When John was asked this question, he replied that he was vice president of the Japan Club and was involved in many other activities. John also stated that he helped set up a booth at the Balloon Race, representing the Japan Club. In order to set up the booth, he contacted the school balloon race official to secure a booth and volunteered half a day to cook food and sell it at the booth. The Japanese personnel staff and other administrators could sense that John was very cooperative and could function quite well with a group.

Japanese companies tend to ask personal questions, which are considered illegal or improper in the US, but they are not illegal in Japan. A few examples of the questions are as follows: Are you married? Do you have a boyfriend/girlfriend? Does your boyfriend/girlfriend like Japan? Do you like Japanese food? Do you miss your parents? What do your parents think of your working for us? Do you get home sick often? How old are you? Do you have brothers and sisters?¹⁰

Questions relating to jobs are: Can you tell us about your background? Do you have any special reasons why you wish to work for our

¹⁰ One of the authors has been accumulating the types of questions asked in actual job interviews. These questions have been provided by Thunderbird students who had job interviews in Japanese for the past twenty years.

company? What can you contribute to our company? Why are you interested in this job? What is an ideal workplace environment for you? In the past, have you worked with a group? What criteria should a leader have in an organization?¹¹

As one can see, it is important for students to be well-prepared in order to answer these personal questions and job-related questions in a job interview in Japan. Other things which students should know while having an interview are that they should never sit until told to do so, not use their hands too much, and not look intensely. They should keep their eyes fixed to the table and be as respectful as possible.

John felt that the mock interview prepared him well for his actual interview. It helped him not because the questions were the same, but because the rehearsal helped him get into the right state of mind.¹² By the time of his interview, he remained calm and was quite ready to talk to the interviewers.

At the end of the interview, students should express their gratitude in Japanese for having had the interview: "*Kyoowa oisogashii tokoro, mensetsu no kikai o kudasaimashite, arigatoo gozaimashita. Doozo yoroshiku onegaishimasu* – Although you were busy, I certainly appreciate your giving me an opportunity to interview today. Thank you. Please treat me favorably." They should bow courteously. This demonstrates that they have a polite attitude towards the interviewer(s) and know how to use polite Japanese appropriately.

John believes that it is very important to look at an interview positively and to make the atmosphere pleasant. For example, during his interview, he mentioned that he was from Kansas and would not mind working in the Illinois area because it is close to his home in Kansas. Additionally, he said that his grandfather, who is in his eighties, still drives the first tractor he bought from the company.

CONCLUSION

As seen in the cases of Judy and John, both Americans show strong points in unique ways, such as writing resumes in Japanese, expressing themselves in their ability to get along well with Japanese people, work-

¹¹ In December, 1998 one of the authors received a list of sentences that were asked in actual job interviews conducted by a personnel manager in an American subsidiary in Tokyo, Japan.

¹² One of the authors had a mock interview with John in February 1996.

ing effectively in groups, and being persistent about having job interviews. The companies chose them, not because they had sufficient Japanese language skills and knew something about Japanese business practices, but because they demonstrated that they had a good personality, character, and a sense of responsibility and cooperation.

Demonstrating understanding of the cross-cultural aspects of doing business with the Japanese is an asset to anyone wishing to work with them. It will also enhance the probability of their success in securing a position. The Thunderbird graduate, Mr. Tomokuni, Judy and John all agree with the importance of this.

Lastly, the authors wish to point out the fact that, interestingly, the two companies spent a lot of time finding the right people. Judy's trading company spent five months, and John's company two years. At the end of the job interviews the two companies offered them positions, rather than notifying them a couple of days after the interviews. The companies must have had very good impressions about Judy and John, and the decisions to hire them were unanimously made during the interviews.

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Miyamoto, Yumi, and Roger Rasmussen. "The Effectiveness of a Japanese Course on Cross-Cultural Competence." *The Journal of Language for International Business* 9.1 (1998): 53-64.

Thunderbird graduate. Personal Interview. February 1996.

Thunderbird student who used to work for a trading company in Tokyo, Japan. Personal Interview. February 1996.

Questionnaire: The original questionnaire is written in Japanese. The attached copy is an English translation. In 1995 and 1996, twenty-nine Japanese questionnaires were circulated to ten Japanese students who used to work for companies in Japan, eight employees who worked for American and Japanese subsidiaries in the area, and to

employees who worked for two subsidiaries of foreign companies in Japan.

Zimmerman, Mark. *How to Do Business with the Japanese: A Strategy for Success*. Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1985.

APPENDIX

QUESTIONNAIRE:
RESEARCH ON NON-JAPANESE AND
THEIR EMPLOYMENT WITH JAPANESE COMPANIES

We have been distributing questionnaires with respect to Japanese language ability and possible future employment with Japanese companies. We would greatly appreciate it if you could answer the following questions.

Sex :

male (24) female (5)

Age:

23-29 (10) 30-39 (7) 40-50 (10) more than 51 (2)

Years of job experience:

1-5 years (8) 6-10 years (6) 11-15 years (4)
16-20 years (3) 21-25 years (2) 26 years and up (2)

Four people did not fill out their service years.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Suppose you now work either in the personnel department or another department of a Japanese company headquartered in Tokyo. Recently the personnel department has issued a policy that non-Japanese people can be employed. Some non-Japanese candidates have summarized and written reports in Japanese on your company's general information and 20-minute presentations on tape are available. You can think of many situations to recruit candidates. With these circumstances in mind, please read the following statements and circle the answer which you feel is most appropriate.

A. Lately the number of foreigners who can speak Japanese has been on the rise. There seem to be two different categories with respect to their ability in Japanese in that 1) some foreigners can only carry on a daily conversation in Japanese and 2) others can perform their jobs in Japanese. If candidates belong to the second category, I am interested in recruiting them.

	Thunderbird Campus	Michigan Area	Two Japanese Companies	Total
1. I am very interested in hiring them.	0	1	3	4
2. I am interested in hiring them.	7	5	4	16
3. I am a little interested.	2	1	2	5
4. I am not very interested.	1	0	1	2
5. I am not interested.	0	1	1	2

B. In regards to teaching Japanese within the company or in relying on another company to teach non-native Japanese employees the Japanese language, Japanese companies in Japan probably cannot afford to, nor do they have a budget to spend on such an educational plan. Thinking about this situation, when it comes to working in Japan, the minimum standard should be that the candidate can speak the language, understand Japanese culture, and recognize Japanese business practices before entering the company.

	Thunderbird Campus	Michigan Area	Two Japanese Companies	Total
1. By all means I would like to meet with him/her.	5	1	2	8
2. I would like to meet him/her.	4	1	5	10
3. It's OK to meet with him/her.	1	6	4	11
4. I don't think I want to meet with him/her.	0	0	0	0
5. I would not meet with him/her.	0	0	0	0

D. When it comes to employment with a Japanese company, not only is the ability to speak the language important, but also the way of treating

clients, manners, and usage of the language, particularly honorific usage, are very important. Unless the candidate can perform these things, it is rather difficult to work for a Japanese company in Japan.

	Thunderbird Campus	Michigan Area	Two Japanese Companies	Total
1. I absolutely agree.	3	2	1	6
2. I agree.	1	1	3	5
3. To a certain degree, I agree.	4	4	6	14
4. I don't necessarily agree.	2	1	1	4
5. I don't agree.	0	0	0	0