

Teaching and Curriculum Issue

Employment Models of the UK and Japan: A Comparative Analysis

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Most university students from whatever country they come from aspire to enter the world of employment. All teachers employed in the university sector have the experience of witnessing students in their interview suits and occasionally missing classes to attend job fairs, explanation days or various stages of interview. Indeed, some teachers also have children who have entered or may soon enter the labor market. It is a big decision for students as to what kind of company or organization they will join and those with international experience may have more choices than others. However, the difference between being employed under the Japanese model and the western model is a lot greater than most people would imagine. There are deep cultural differences which students need to be aware of in order to properly consider this important move in their lives.

Security

Although the Japanese model of lifetime employment has been damaged since the 1990s by the growth of non-regular employees, the majority of workers in Japan are employed on that basis. As of 2012, 61.8% of Japanese employees were regular employees. (Genda 2012) Students who are looking for stability above all else may look to a Japanese company first. In return, for this stability, Japanese organizations expect loyalty. Yuki Honda, Professor at the University of Tokyo described this as a "membership model". In contrast, a British counterpart for example would not expect such stability from a British company and will be looking at the company to acquire skills in order to prepare for their next move up the career ladder. In fact, according to The Telegraph, the average British person will have six jobs in a lifetime.

Skills

This attitude is reflected at respective job interviews in both countries. British companies tend to be most interested in what skills the student has already and how the company can

benefit from those skills right away. The company in the UK realizes too, that the employee may not stay with the company for very long. In contrast, job interviews in Japan tend to be aimed at establishing how much of a team player the potential employee might be; a typical question being for example, what clubs a student participated in at school. Such a question in a job interview in a western country would not be considered relevant.

Salary and Promotion

Part of the reason why British employees change their jobs frequently is because they are looking to increase their salaries. In Japanese companies using the traditional model, many employees come to expect that their salaries will naturally grow due to their seniority. Despite an apparent trend since the 1990s for the salary gap between senior and junior employees to have narrowed, Ryo Kambayashi (Kambayashi 2015) notes that since then there has been a return to "seniority based pay". For those employees, promotion and the salary increases are automatic. In the UK however, excepting small increments, if the employee wishes to see a significant increase in salary, he/she needs to apply for another position within the company or very often to a different organization. The application process tends to be very competitive so climbing the corporate ladder can be demanding.

Working Hours

Japanese companies are known for their long working hours and the culture of working overtime. Tomoko Otake from the Japan Times cited a recent survey in which 1 in 4 companies admitted having their employees work over 80 hours of overtime per month. In Britain too, working lives have become more hectic and competitive. However, there is still the strong belief that the standard hours should be from 9 to 5. The Office for National Statistics showed that the average British employee worked 37.4 hours per week in the fall of 2015. Furthermore the British Government website declares that by law employees cannot "work more than 48 hours a week on average". Britain has a long history of workers and unions fighting for better conditions, thus the comparatively shorter working week has become a cultural norm. This is not due to lack of the will to work, (although in some cases it may be true). Because British workers know they need to improve their skills to receive a better salary, many people use time at the weekends and in the evenings to add to their resumes. In the UK, there are ample opportunities for adult education at various institutions, many of them publicly funded. In fact, according to the Office of National Statistics "in 2009 /2010 4.6 million adult learners participated in some form of government-funded further education"

Ambitious people consider themselves responsible for their own professional development, and with an eye on their next move in the job market, staying late to work overtime for the sake of company loyalty would not weigh too heavily on their minds. On the other hand, others who are not interested such things may choose to spend that time with family, achieving a satisfying work/life balance. To many, the idea of employees working weekends or well into the evening would be unacceptable.

Retirement

With longer lifespans in both countries, the ages at which workers are forced to retire and on what terms, is an important issue to consider. In Japan, companies consider the retirement age to be 60, although employees may not be able to draw a pension at this time. Therefore, the employer often continues their employment, but often at reduced wages. The U.K. has already implemented laws to increase the retirement age to 67 and will enact a law to further increase it to 68 by 2037. Wage reductions are not common practice in the UK, however as the retirement age rises, so does the age at which workers can claim a state pension.

Job Descriptions

One aspect of the Japanese employment model, which may be remarkable to foreigners, would be the lack of written job descriptions. Jones notes that according to the traditional Japanese model "Workers are not hired to perform a particular set of tasks... but rather to be a part of the corporate culture." (qtd. in Aspinall 2011) However, written job descriptions outlining employees' responsibilities are standard practice in the UK and are available to all candidates applying for open positions. Supporters of this system such as Honda say it helps job seekers give them an idea as to what will be expected of them. They also know that failure to fulfill the job description means breach of contract and therefore can be legally dismissed because of this. In the case of Japan therefore, because of the lack of written job descriptions, it makes it harder for companies to dismiss unproductive employees. However, it also empowers the company in certain ways. For example, Japanese companies are known to transfer employees to different parts of the country or even to another country as part of their duties. The employee cannot easily refuse as a British employee could by claiming it is not in his/her contract. Therefore there is no culture of "Tanshin Funin," (for which there is no easy translation), a company employee living and working in a different place due to being transferred. Needless to say, the thought of a company asking an employee in the UK to move to another place away from family and friends would be an

anathema.

Conclusions

The traditional Japanese employment model and the western one are clearly different. The job seekers need to carefully not only examine the job market, but also examine themselves. Those seeking a job with less overtime and commitment must also take on the responsibility for his/her future career progression. Likewise, those who seek stability and security may be forced to sacrifice some freedom in order to reap those benefits. It is up to young people to educate themselves about the different systems, and more importantly to learn to know themselves in order to make a suitable decision at this important time in their lives.

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