

Lessons from Foreign Women Professionals Working in Japan

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Introduction

The Japanese corporations are famously known as manly, traditional and inflexible towards women. Furthermore, if those women are foreigners, it could get even more complicated.

This paper analyzes the work life of foreign women professionals employed in Japan, the issues they face (type of job, language, cultural differences), the advantages or disadvantages they have compared to the Japanese female employees and the foreign male professionals, what the Japanese companies should do to comply with the needs of their foreign employees and the advice of these women for the female professionals who have future plans of coming to work in Japan.

The research is based on the related literature, the researches made anteriorly, the official statistical data and a questionnaire administered to foreign women professionals working in private and public sectors in Japan. And moreover, on one of the authors' personal experience and data she gathered during her work-internship in a Tokyo based company between 2012 and 2014.

Former researches, statistics and literature related to foreign women professionals working in Japan

Since 2013, when Prime Minister Shinzo Abe started sustaining more women in the working place in order to boost the economy, the idea of women empowerment has become a hot topic and many are waiting to see the real results of it. Mainly, the prime minister supports Japanese women to continue working even after marriage and childbirth and rise on the hierarchical ladder. However, in his speeches, the conditions of foreign women professionals are not mentioned and so we, the authors, were curious what is happening with them and what are they dealing with in their jobs in the present times.

In 1996, MIT Sloan Management Review published the results of a survey (Taylor and Napier, 1996) that was made by interviewing the members of Foreign Executive Women (Few) Organisation¹ and the female members of the American Chamber of Commerce in Japan. The results indicated at that time that the adjustment to the Japanese work (3.8 out of 5) and the

adjustment to the living environment (4 out of 5) was not a serious problem for foreign women professionals in Japan. Other findings indicated that if the Japanese bosses, colleagues, clients, etc. have positive attitudes towards their foreign women employees, the nature of the woman's job and the power/freedom of decision leads to a more positive adjustment. On the other side, if the job duties and expectations are unclear, if they are asked to perform duties below their professional status (such as tea serving), if they experience *sekuhara* (sexual harassment), if they have low language skills and finally if they are young (in Japan age means hierarchy and competence/authority), for the foreign women it is much more difficult to adjust. Another difficulty has been identified in relation to the social life in Japan, especially for the single women: difficulties in dating Japanese nationals (because of the different culture and role expectations).

However, being a foreign woman in Japan also has advantages (compared to foreign men), such as: visibility (easy to remember) and curiosity from the male business partners, easiness to be attentive to details (women tend to remember more easily birthdates or other special dates of their business partners and their families'), easiness to adapt to life as outsiders. Finally, the report highlights the necessity of training (especially in relation to cultural differences) before and during the first months of work in the Japanese environment; the necessity of job support by receiving a clear title and job position (which will establish her authority inside and outside of the organization) and by working in a supportive atmosphere for women employees.

In the book *Doing business with Japanese men: A woman's handbook* (Brannen and Wilen 1998), the authors highlight the idea that when working with Japanese males, a woman's personal confidence is the key to establish her authority: "confidence in the way you walk, sit, stand, dress, respond, and speak" (18). All these define and assert one's authority. Also, by presenting their clear position and role in a company, together with their credentials and experience, it can help create a clear image to the Japanese business partners, and thus, ensure more respect for the woman. However, it is essential, the authors underline, to understand the fact that many Japanese men don't have the experience and don't know what is the appropriate behavior towards women, especially foreign women. In some cases, through questions like "Why aren't you married?" or "How many children do you plan to have?", the Japanese men are just trying to be friendly.

Apart from the hassles which foreign women encounter due to being outsiders of the Japanese traditional and working culture, they also have to face the society's mindset over a woman's role and place at home and at work. Traditionally, a Japanese woman's work life was short: only until her marriage. Due to this cultural expectation, employers would not "train female employees for jobs beyond making tea or greeting customers" (Subhash and Norton 1993, 254). At the same time, women were considered as only part-timers and had/have jobs of auxiliary nature, with no supervisory capability (Ibid., 267), smaller salaries and

lesser opportunities for advancement. Also, because the Japanese companies use seniority (that discriminates the short-term employees) and life-time employment systems, women do not have many chances of becoming equal to men at work and gaining promotions to managerial positions. Last but not least, women are excluded from in-company rotation and company training programs that are necessary in order to advance. The training they receive is a minimal one, only related to the way of greeting customers, how to bow, how to use the polite language and perform reception activities, such as answering the phone (Subhash and Norton 1993).

Also, women in Japan are expected to shoulder the majority of household burdens, in a country where men work some of the longest hours in the developed world (OECD) and at the same time women are also supposed to take care of the family's elders, the education of the children, house management, etc. (OECD Better life index).

The questionnaire

The first four questions of the survey were created to establish the profile of the respondents (the age and type of institution they work in) and the circumstances which determined their decision to work in Japan. Thus, the questionnaire was filled in by women with ages ranging between 20 and 50 years old, seventy-eight percent of which are working in private companies, while twenty-two percent are working in public institutions. While the majority of the female respondents began working in Japan between 2009 and 2015, there have also been individuals who began their professional activity in Japan between the 1980's and 2001, therefore the answers to the questionnaire will also provide a comparison between more recent experiences and earlier ones, in order to determine if a potential shift in perspective can be observed.

The top reason for choosing to work in Japan is related to educational purposes, like teaching, enrollment in various educational programs, such as Master's degrees or scholarships, improving their level of Japanese and learning martial arts. The second reason provided is the interest in the culture and lifestyle of the country, usually determined by travelling within the country, previous study stages in Japanese universities, or the desire to live abroad. Other reasons were either family-related, such as marriage with a Japanese native, reuniting with family members or relationship partners settled in Japan, or to a better salary and professional opportunities, as well as the need for adventure.

The fifth question of the survey tried to establish the methods and parameters based on which the foreign female respondents chose their work place. The most popular method was internet research, preferred by sixteen percent of the respondents, while as far as the criteria is concerned, the main determining parameter was the field of activity, followed closely by the salary level. Among other criteria, the respondents enumerated the location, the benefits offered by the company, such as accommodation, means of transportation and company phone, the working hours and the status of permanent employee.

The following two questions of the survey aimed at evaluating how the adjustment of the respondents was impacted at the beginning of their career and how well they are adjusted at the moment in their professional position. The main impacting element for most of the participants to the survey was their language ability, almost thirty-eight percent of them admitting that their level of Japanese language created difficulties for them in the beginning. Cultural differences were considered the second most impacting aspect on the early stages of the career, thus emphasizing the difficulty of the foreign female employees to adapt to the Japanese norms and mentality, while the third most impacting factor was declared to be the social life. Although in smaller percentages, gender discrimination and age were among the provided answers, while other answers include the type of job and accommodation as affecting factors at the beginning of their career. Fifty-six percent of the participants claimed to be well adjusted, while only nine percent acknowledge that they are not very well adjusted.

The eighth question of the survey was meant to identify the added value the respondents consider they bring to the Japanese company they work in and what it has to gain from having a foreign employee. The main enumerated benefits are the different cultural approaches that they provide to the company or institution, a global perspective and internationalism. The majority agrees that the company can benefit from their mindset and cultural background to improve their efficiency and their awareness of cultural differences and wide range of individual personalities, rather than the collective personality of the Japanese employees. As a great part of the respondents worked in an academic or education-related field, another important benefit they mentioned bringing to the companies and institutions they work for is the expertise of a native speaker in teaching grammar and pronunciation. Other benefits include getting more customers, obtaining more business skills and more opportunities abroad, a higher degree of proactivity.

As far as the support provided by the companies to their foreign employees, sixty-three percent of the survey participants feel that their employer respects and supports them in performing their work by providing training activities, support in day to day activities (form filling, paying bills, health checks etc.), satisfactory benefits, flexible working hours, understanding regarding their level of Japanese language, and respect towards their opinions and beliefs. On the other hand, thirty-seven percent of the respondents did not benefit from the support of their employers, providing justifications such as the lack of time dedicated to accomplish their tasks, the preference of the companies to work with Japanese people, the lack of openness to new ideas and suggestions, apparent lack of trust from the colleagues and managers, no opportunity of advancement and the stubbornness of their managers to maintain the Japanese ways. Regarding the improvement, the main aspects mentioned by the respondents are open-mindedness, a more global perspective and flexibility towards the methods of doing business, better communication with the employees, simplified procedures

and HR support for foreign employees. While answering the question, related to what improvements should companies bring in their relationship with foreign employees, it was mutually agreed by the majority of the respondents that they should be more open minded, should communicate more with their foreign employees and should learn to accept the different cultural backgrounds of the others.

Regarding the existence of certain advantages for foreign women professionals, compared to the Japanese female employees, sixty-six percent of the respondents agreed that they do feel more favored compared to their Japanese counterparts. According to their responses, they are treated with more seriousness, they are more preferred by the customers, and they are not expected to comply with all the strict regulations and to work overtime, hence feeling less pressure than Japanese women from this perspective. However, compared to their foreign male counterparts, eighty-one percent of the respondents answered that they do not feel favored, while only nineteen percent claimed that they do feel like they have more leverage, mainly due to their gender, but also due to their easygoingness. As far as the relationship of the respondents to their Japanese female colleagues is concerned, the majority answered that they have a good and very good collaboration, while only two persons admitted that it was not so good and one person that it was bad. Most of the participants to the study also claimed that they did not feel any kind of pressure coming from their female Japanese colleagues to comply with their norms, while twenty-eight percent observed such a tendency, and nineteen percent did not notice anything related to this aspect. The ones who have experienced some kind of pressure from their female Japanese colleagues mentioned that they were constantly told to respect the rules and not question them, and even to “be more subservient and accept gender discrimination, rather than stand up against it”. However, most of the respondents admitted to their intentions of continuing to work in Japan, some for a few more years, while others for a greater period of their lives, twenty-five percent of them declaring that they would like to continue working there all their lives.

As the main purpose of the questionnaire was to analyze the experiences of foreign female professionals in Japan and to have access to as many different perspectives as possible, the final question of the survey asks the participants to provide their advice regarding a career in Japan. The main conclusions were that, in order to be successful as a female employee in Japan, one must have a good language level, if the job requires it, to not be afraid of stating one’s opinion and to not feel pressured to comply with all the Japanese norms and regulations. However, from their point of view, it is advisable to learn to accept the country as it is, as much as possible and to do a thorough research about Japan before deciding to enroll in such an experience.

Other conclusions

Apart from the normal adjustment issues that foreigners usually face when going to work in another country, as we could see in our research, the ones who go to Japan have to deal with specific language and cultural difficulties and a sometimes a strict, discriminative and hierarchical environment. However, foreign women tend to be more visible and easy to remember by the Japanese they interact with in their work, they are given more attention and are less pushed to work overtime and are accepted as outsiders of the Japanese culture, with all the advantages one could get from this: less expectations and pressure to conform, but also with disadvantages: being seen always as an outsider to the Japanese ways.

References

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Notes

- 1 FEW is an organization based in Tokyo. It was founded in 1981 by two foreign female entrepreneurs and has as mission to "enable internationally-minded women in Japan to achieve their full professional and personal potential." Website: <http://fewjapan.com/>