

FOR PROMOTING EMPLOYMENT AND ACTIVITIES OF EXCHANGE STUDENTS IN JAPANESE  
COMPANIES

- Through hearing investigation of former exchange students - (summary version)

Shizuoka University International Center

**0. Summary of the Investigation**

Period: August and September 2009

Method: \_ In June 2009, we requested higher education institutions in Shizuoka Prefecture to introduce us to former exchange students who are now working at Japanese companies. Then we started collecting agreement on the hearing and question sheet from 13 persons (hereinafter referred to as A to M).

\_ We started a hearing investigation for about 1 hour each to those 13 persons in August and September 2009.

Persons of concern: 13 former exchange students who graduated from higher education institutes in Shizuoka Prefecture and then were employed by Japanese companies (Refer to Table 1).

Investigator: 1 teaching staff from Shizuoka University International Center

**1. How to Join a Company and the Reason**

**1-1. How to Join a Company and the Job Descriptions (Refer to Table 1) [pp-72-76]**

The investigation on how to join the company shows that 4 persons of A, B, I and J freely applied for the job at the companies they are currently working, 3 persons of C, F and K are working at the companies they used to work as a part-timer while they were students, 2 persons, G and L used a job-placement office to work at the current company, only 1 person, D, is working at a company who was a customer at the time of the student, only 1 person, E, is working at a company through an introduction by a friend, only 1 person, H, is working at a company through a recommendation of the university, and only 1 person, M, is working at a laboratory office at the time as a student. B who freely applied for a job was introduced by the Employment Assistance Department of the university while A, I, and J used the Employment Assistance Department of the university in order to obtain relevant information and advice. For G and L who used a job-placement office for their job search, it was the second company for G and the third company for L to be working with. Both of them started working at a company through an introduction by an instructing staff at the time of graduating from the university.

For the information about the companies they started working for, A, H, I, and J obtained through their job searching activities. C, F, K, and M experienced to involve service as a part-timer before they

started working so that they could grasp the atmospheres of the companies while B, D, and E rarely obtained company information when they were employed.

Although L majored in electric and electronics engineering, L was working as an SE in a web-development company. Furthermore, in the case of G and L, as an exchange student who completed graduate courses, they had working experience before the entry to the university and their ages may correspond to those under mid-career employment. In case of a mid-career employment, the employees often start services immediately after the entry to the company, and time needed for training purposes can often be eliminated. It is presumed that exchange students often obtained recruitment information about the company through a briefing session for new graduates; however, it is thought more useful information can be obtained for some exchange students through a job-placement office.

### **1-2. Reasons to Join a Company [pp.76-80]**

Reasons include "emphasis on developing human resources," "famous company," "internationally developing," and "higher technology," "good place to use and utilize a result of what was learned," "can fulfill one's potentiality," and "can obtain a residence status." It tells that they joined the companies because it was not a means to obtain a residence status, but also a chance to fulfill and improve one's performance. However, some former exchange students changed their determination after the entry.

### **1-3. Job Description at the Time of Employment and the Present One [pp.80-84]**

Although 8 persons were doing a job instructed at the time of employment, 5 persons were doing a job different from the one instructed at the time of employment.

B was in charge of a job overseas (own country); however, it was changed to a domestic job after 1 year. On the contrary, E and I were in charge of a domestic job; they also became in charge of an overseas (own countries) job. This was because an attending person for an overseas (own country) job resigned after their entry.

D was assigned to domestic sales as customer service training and continues to work in the same section because no attending job for overseas tourists was present when D was informed before entry. Although K, who is an engineer now, was in an Administrative and Control Department, matching the major in the university, for half of the year after the entry, the job was changed because one engineer resigned. In addition to a session and in-house training, D was also self-learning to maintain the job.

H and J were notified at the time of entry about a job for contacting overseas in the future, and they were developing their carriers through domestic jobs for the time being. However, it was not clear when they started attending overseas jobs due mainly to the company policy.

## **2. Present Satisfactory Ratio [pp84-88]**

A satisfactory ratio greatly depends on the gap between the present job description and the one indicated at the time of the entry and human relationships.

As described at “1-2 Reasons to Join a Company (p.81),” it was D whose job indicated before entry was not present after entry, and an attending the job was not fixed for 10 months. Even the answer from B as mentioned below told us that a forecast from the conditions and information indicated before entry was different from the present state. The gap hereof suggests it was a factor to decrease the satisfactory ratio leading to leaving the job.

Furthermore, the satisfactory ratio to the present state also depends on the fact of whether or not they had known and understood the working conditions before entry. D only knew the salary amount and the working conditions after entry. F stated that F had never known about the accurate salary amount before signing a contract. There was a big difference in L whose satisfactory ratio of the salary was not so high but L approached the contract with the knowledge of the working conditions from the beginning.

Meanwhile, it was reluctant for I to join the company with the job; however, I had felt the improvement at work and became confident so that I stayed at the job. From an answer from J, it was obvious that the atmosphere of the company and what J wanted to do were prioritized instead of the satisfactory ratio of the salary.

However, it was not only a criterion of the satisfactory ratio with the gap between the conditions indicated before entry and a forecast from the information. A satisfactory ratio varies from whether or not maintaining a good human relationship. D mentioned that no good human relationship could be expected due to in-house conveniences in addition to a gap between the present job description and the one indicated before entry. Unlike D, the company that G immediately started working after graduation gave G a job description that G expected to get, and G intended to work long; however, G left the job because of a problem with the human relationship with the superior.

Although I joined the company whose line of service was exactly different from what I expected, the human relationship was so good that I had maintained the job until now. K who had graduated from an academic faculty had a hard time doing the job requiring a science education when the job was changed half a year after entry; K said "I like to do so now" because of the good human relationships.

## **3. Qualities and Abilities Required for a Job [pp.88-92]**

Half of the former exchange students thought it was necessary after entry as a resource and ability to have the ability to do, ability to plan, language (mainly Japanese) skill, ability to discover challenges,

flexibility, expertise and skills for conducting a job, ability to know a situation, and knowledge on Japanese culture and society. Among them, what were particularly recognized necessary were the ability to do (4/8 persons), ability to plan (1/8 persons), language skill (2/8 persons), flexibility (3/7 persons), expertise and skills for conducting a job (4/7 persons), and knowledge on Japanese culture and society (2/6 persons). Three out of 5 former exchange students pointed out independence. The resources and abilities hereabove are recognized necessary irrespectively in a job type.

#### **4. Japanese Skills Required for Conducting a Job [pp.92]**

Except G and L, all had passed the second level of the Japanese Language Aptitude Test. (Refer to Table 1) Furthermore, they had long stayed in Japan. A sum of the period at being registered at the university through starting to work was simply between 5 and 10 years in Japan. All used Japanese at work.

##### **4-1. Japanese Proficiency Skills Required on the Job [pp.93-95]**

For the category of Japanese proficiency skills required on the job, most former exchange students mentioned the skills of dialog on the job, documentation, and ability for precise description, particularly precise description and documentation were mentioned more.

##### **4-2. Japanese Language Aptitude after Entry [pp.95-100]**

Each of them basically had some level of Japanese language aptitude, and had long stayed in Japan. However, more answers mention that they had felt a lacking of Japanese language aptitude; particularly, they had mentioned that they had a difficulty in using an expression required on the job and a polite expression after entry even with a high Japanese language aptitude. Most of them had improved their Japanese language skills through language training and routines better than that at entry; however, it took 3 months to one year.

2 SEs (H and J) had felt they had lacked a hybrid Japanese aptitude so as to catch and write the language required for a meeting minutes instead of a single skill.

However, a part of the Japanese skills was not so required to be at a higher level depending on the job in a case may be. G mentioned that G was involved in creating a drawing on designing a machine, and less often wrote Japanese. C mentioned that C was involved in an interpreting and translating job; however, had less chance to write Japanese, the same as G because the company suspected the Japanese skills of foreign employees and did not require these foreign employees to do a job related to writing Japanese as a presumption.

## **5. Images of Japanese and Foreign Employees**

### **5-1. Image of Japanese Employees [pp.100-105]**

In an investigation with a question sheet, 6 persons had basically had an image that all Japanese employees were always serious and work hard. But after entry (started working), some of them answered that the image had changed, saying that not necessarily all of the Japanese employees are serious all the time; however, many of them had recognized that Japanese employees are serious and dedicated. With this respect, some answers included that they always thought about jobs, and superior was everything presumably as a result of being too serious. Some others had answered that they had strongly felt a difference in recognition to an abstract concept such as cooperativeness from that of Japanese employees. Even in “3. Qualities and Capabilities Required for a Job (pp.88-92.)” the same concept was expressed in a different expression between former exchange students. Since it was difficult to indicate a specific object in an abstract concept, a variance would be possibly caused between the understanding of a speaker (writer) and that of a listener (reader). To a speaker (writer), precise description would be required more. Some had commented that they did not understand why female employees were treated and promoted differently from male employees.

### **5-2. Image of Foreign Employees by Japanese Employees [pp.105-107]**

Then, let us focus on how Japanese employees felt about foreign employees. In some answers, they had never thought how Japanese employees felt about foreign employees while there were answers that a specific image was fixed, and a no specific image was fixed. In a case of a specific image was fixed, positive and negative images were answered on a half-and-half basis.

## **6. Foresight and Prospects [pp.108-113]**

In a form of company and employment, more answers were in “Work as it is now” (6 persons), “Not yet decided” (3 persons), “Work as it is or Start a new business” (2 persons), and “Work at a different company” (2 persons) in this order. In a line of business and jobs, more answers were in “Being in charge of administrating job such as human resources” (6 persons), “Not yet decided” (4 persons), Working at a site” (= same as the present job, 2 persons), and “Being in charge of administrating and control job” (1 person) in this order. In the residence, what were answered were “Keep living in Japan” (7 persons), “Not yet decided” (4 persons), “Returning to one’s own country” (1 person), and “Going to a different country” (1 person). A trend was seen that they wished to involve in a different job with the current state maintained in a form of company and employment, and of residence.

Although a trend seemed to tell that most of them had thought of the foresight and prospects up to the present irrespective of being married or unmarried people, G and J had planned even when they were in their own countries that they would work and live in Japan after coming to Japan. It was obvious to confirm the intention to resist in Japan in a case of coming to Japan with a specific plan hereof. In view of an answer on residence, a form of company and employment would become obvious to some extent.

#### **7. Burdens after Entry [pp.113-118]**

A hearing investigation had found various burdens present after entry besides communications in Japanese.

First, it was listed that they should become accustomed to a job. C and I mentioned that they had a hard time becoming accustomed to the job itself. A and K had difficulty because they were assigned to a job that required knowledge and skill different from those required for the study at the university. J had a hard time effectively processing the job by reflecting an attitude towards the study at the university, and J mentioned it was still under improvement.

Answers of D and E told that former exchange students had different feelings against Japanese culture and company in-house culture even though they had stayed long in Japan. Both D and E had an experience with working in their own countries; thus, they had a high consciousness as a working person before working at a Japanese company. Comments from D and E who had faced problems based on the understanding of Japan and Japanese people included various suggestions on employing exchange students.

An attitude afterwards would be drastically different depending on the chance available freely consulting or complaining whenever these difficulties hereabove may arise. As A states however, the former exchange students were in a circumstance too different from where they came from so that they could not talk to their parents on their own life experiences in most cases. As D states, it was therefore also important to talk and share difficulties at work with the employees who joined the company in the same year or the associates in the same section.

F was in charge of a job of which segment was obvious with high independency. Thus, F was also irritated that F could not improve one's own ability at work because F had no chance to get involved in a job except for the job assigned. Statement of I told that it was a really a hard time to come to understand that relationships at work were something different from which was established at the university.

#### **8. Knowledge and Skills that should have been acquired during School [pp. 118-122]**

Former exchange students, based on their work experiences, named various examples of skills and

knowledge that they felt they should have acquired during school. Such skills include “English skills,” “computer skills,” “specialized skills needed for performing business,” and “Japanese skills.” In addition, “certification acquisition,” “knowledge of the culture and customs of Japanese companies,” “communication skills” and the “correct attitude to study” were also named. Certifications are especially considered to increase options when changing a job. Although it might be difficult to gain knowledge about the culture and customs of Japanese companies while in school, others can be acquired during school.

### **9. For Exchange Students to Flourish in Japanese Society and Companies after Graduation [pp.122-129]**

There are many opinions around the point that one must gain knowledge about Japanese society and the culture of Japanese companies through part-time jobs and social activities and personally understand it. On the other hand, it is also practically true that you cannot understand these things unless you are on the inside of Japanese society and culture. Therefore, there were several answers stating that one must recognize his or her strengths and think about what role he or she would play in the company as an organization. As discussed in “7. Challenges after Entering the Company (p.113-118),” exchange students usually do not have families whom they can consult with more life experience, and as H and M states, emotional stability is an important factor.

Moreover, in order for exchange students to flourish and advance in Japanese society and companies, a high level of Japanese language ability with which they can correspond with clients and business partners is necessary, as E, I, J, L and M emphasize.

### **10. For Japanese Companies to Ease their Fear of Hiring Exchange Students**

#### **10-1. Opinions of Former Exchange Students on the Fear that Companies Have [pp. 129-133]**

Table 2: Fear about Employing Exchange Students (136 companies in Shizuoka)

Fear or risks by when employing international students	Total	Have employed	Want to employ	No employment
Japanese language problem	36.8	32.1	46.7	36.0
Lack of Japanese social/business skills	26.5	33.9	20.0	22.0
Loss of confidential knowledge	14.7	16.1	13.3	14.0
Lack of cooperation between Japanese and international staff	32.4	23.2	46.7	34.0
Older than Japanese students	14.7	7.1	16.7	22.0
Will quit a job in a short span of time to return home or change jobs	55.9	42.9	56.7	70.0

Difficult visa procedure	24.3	17.9	40.0	22.0
Possibilities of no applicants	4.4	1.8	6.7	6.0
Other	7.4	5.4	0	6.0

(Shizuoka Prefecture Council for Promotion of Foreign Student Exchange (2008) from “A Survey on Exchange Students’ Ideas of Employment and Companies’ Ideas of Employing Exchange Students in Shizuoka Prefecture”)

When asked for their impression on Table 2, some former exchange students made comments on the answer “Will quit a job in a short span of time to return home or change jobs (55.9%),” such as “Even if someone wants to teach, it is meaningless if the new employee returns home soon.” On the other hand, others also made comments like “The rate of leaving jobs among young Japanese people has been increasing regardless of their gender,” stating that it is not unique to exchange students. Regarding the point “Japanese language problem (36.8%), while recognizing the importance of Japanese language competence, there were comments stating that language is not the only problem: “It can be solved through efforts of the company and exchange students,” “They should not hire people with language problems,” and “Japanese people sometimes cannot understand each other, so companies that think ‘language’ is the biggest problem have shallow thinking.” On the point “Lack of cooperation between Japanese and international staff (32.4%),” the only comment made was “It can be solved through efforts of the company and exchange students.” However, as A states in “5-1. Images of Japanese Staff,” the different perceptions on the word “cooperation” should be considered. Regarding “Lack of Japanese social/business skills (26.5%),” some suspected that companies cannot let exchange students correspond with clients due to their lack of Japanese skills. Regarding “Difficult visa procedure (24.3%),” there was an opinion that it might not be that troublesome once the documents are prepared.

## **10-2. Causes of Companies’ Fear and Strategies to Remove it [pp. 133-147]**

Former exchange students named causes from the side of the companies and that of exchange students.

First of all, one of the causes of fear on the companies’ side is that there is fundamentally no clear reason for employing an international staff. As G and H states, for positions that can be performed either by Japanese or an international staff, many companies tend to hire Japanese who pose less fear factors such as lack of Japanese skills and leaving the country. They pointed out that this is because of the ambiguity of why companies should hire an international staff, which results in their unprepared environment to receive an international staff, as well as the lack of learning by the Japanese staff about the international staff and other cultures. Moreover, it is suspected that some exchange students, even



though they are hired, are still continuing to work without really understanding their role. First of all, companies might not have a basic structure to employ exchange students, thereby lacking awareness and unable to raise them as talented staff or utilize them. The indication that Japanese companies and the government are behind in responding to globalization is important. In order to improve such a situation, as A states, it is necessary to examine, plan and implement how companies can globalize themselves and what steps are needed for that purpose. However, unless the purpose and the process of realizing the idea are not shared by the entire system including the practice level and not just the upper management level, there is fear of “shake and distortion(p.142)” pointed out by H. In the process of holistic globalization or as a result of it, the ambiguous fear of employing exchange students will be dissolved, and companies will be able to appropriately utilize a talented workforce.

In contrast, as a cause on the side of exchange students, the point that they have a low awareness about employment and have insufficient preparation was raised. That is, as a result of doing a job hunt without a clear sense of what they want to do, they would end up with unsatisfactory employment. Employment without any plan or awareness is not challenging. Exchange students should decide on their employers upon researching companies and conducting self analysis, in addition to learning sufficient specialized knowledge, skills, and Japanese.

Moreover, for a foreign national to stay in Japan, obtaining a visa is required. J states that in reality it is difficult to change the field of expertise after entering university or getting a job, thereby resulting in unsatisfactory employment.

F points out Japanese companies place too much emphasis on Japanese competence and may not correctly evaluate practical ability and qualities that are needed for business. In fact, around F, there are some examples of employment where specialized knowledge and skills were greatly valued (“10-2. Causes of Companies’ Fear and Strategies to Remove it (p.140 )”). A also mentioned a similar case (“10-1. Opinions of Former Exchange Students on the Fear Companies Have (p. 130)”), and the opinion that a high level of Japanese competence is not the only factor in gaining a satisfactory job in Japan is worthy of attention. L as well speculates that the main cause of why Japanese companies do not hire an international staff is not due to their lack of Japanese skills, but the companies’ types of industry and those of tasks. However, in A’s example, “Her Japanese when I listen is not that good, just so-so,” and in F’s example, this person after becoming a part of the staff “...performed computer/IT-related tasks, and passed level 1 in the Japanese Language Proficiency Test in one year.” As these cases show, their level of Japanese competence is at a certain standard. Moreover, as I stated in “10-1. Opinions of Former Exchange Students on the Fear Companies Have (p.132 ),” it is true that even if one is highly skilled, if his or her Japanese competence is inadequate, opportunities for promotion within the company will be

limited. Thus, it is not that Japanese competence is not required, but when one has knowledge and skills necessary to perform business tasks, a certain level of Japanese skills is needed additionally.

## **11. Summary**

From the interviews with 13 former exchange students, some important factors in order for exchange students to flourish in Japanese society and Japanese companies were revealed.

Exchange students first should correctly understand how the job-hunting process in Japan works and what it means. With that, they have to conduct sufficient company research and self analysis. The company research and self analysis can be done before the third year, when students usually start their job hunting. Especially, it is important to clarify what one wants to do. It is easy to imagine cases where images differ before and after entering the company. However, the process of company research and self analysis will serve as a standard to recognize one's strengths and decide what role one would play in the company as an organization, regardless of whether one is staying with the company or changing a job.

Even if one cannot decide types of industry or job, it is important to make efforts to maximize his or her "English skills," "computer skills," "specialized skills needed for performing business," and "Japanese skills" through the daily studies at the university. It is difficult to gain "knowledge about Japanese society and the culture of Japanese companies" and "communication skills" solely through the studies at the university, but by actively participating in part-time jobs, club activities, social activities, and by carefully observing and experiencing "Japan as an organization," it is highly possible to gain these skills.

In contrast, companies foremost should clarify the reason for employing an international staff. If the reason is shared at all levels of the company, it will be possible to solidify factors needed to realize the idea, and to plan and implement it. If the reason remains ambiguous, both the new employee and the department he or she is assigned to will both be just as confused, and it will be difficult to organically fulfill the original purpose. If a company is clear with the reason for hiring exchange students, it can be considered to be capable of appropriately hiring and utilizing exchange students who recognize their strengths to meet the need for its development.

In addition, the Japanese government should clarify the meaning of having exchange students taken root in Japanese society as a highly talented workforce. Currently, the Japanese government has started to recognize exchange students' change in their field of study after entering university or seeking employment in businesses whose fields differ from their majors with more flexibility. However, at the same time, it is important to create an environment where it is easy for exchange students to remain in Japan even after they lose their exchange student status. Not only the change in procedures to switch

and renew visa status, but also the establishment of a system for institutional guarantee (upon signing an apartment lease) after employment would encourage movement with and stay in Japan.

Finally, the university staff should give opportunities for exchange students to know what job hunting is. With that, they need to provide information about job hunting and Japanese companies to exchange students at appropriate times, in appropriate forms. Efforts are needed to make sure no students are lacking awareness about job hunting or gaining insufficient company information as seen presently. Moreover, for exchange students to continue to work in Japanese companies, it is insufficient for them to only have Japanese skills or professional competence. Particularly, in graduate degrees in science, it is considered that achievements in the specialized field are highly valued and for exchange students, Japanese skills are not required. However, both L and M, who finished doctorate degrees in science (Electrical and Electronic Engineering and Biotechnology respectively) while having scientific positions, still convey the importance of Japanese skills. Universities, including exchange program related personnel, should not only approach exchange students, companies and the government, but also make efforts to publicize the fact that, in order to have more capable individuals staying in Japan, both having accomplishments, knowledge or skills in the specialized field and learning Japanese are equally important.