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JAPAN

Evaluating the Japanese Job Candidate

by Thomas J. Nevins

Finding the right person for the right job in your Japanese branch office is a challenge that, like other aspects of doing business in that country, requires a sophisticated knowledge of the culture.

From the outset, the process defies the usual expectations. In the United States and elsewhere, companies may be used to receiving unsolicited résumés from prospective employees. In Japan, unless you run an advertisement, the likelihood of receiving unsolicited résumés from Japanese candidates is rather limited. Even when you run a very well-written newspaper or recruiting-magazine ad, only a few qualified candidates are likely to respond.

"Discount the chemistry of the [job] interview."

Evaluating the résumés that you do receive also involves a completely different approach than you'd use elsewhere. First, the traditional Japanese-style résumé—and its English-language translation—merely indicates the months and years that an individual has worked in a given position, providing the name of that department and the individual's title. To that information, the applicant usually appends only a bland account of the number of family members, his hobbies, and other miscellaneous information.

The simple fact is that most Japanese—especially in the major Japanese firms where the closed or internal labor market prevails—have never written, or even thought about writing their résumés. Even if they had, the process would entail providing no detail about their job functions, and no mention of their individual accomplishments.

As a result, the fact that a résumé says nothing—and is not at all impressive by Western standards—is no justification for rejecting a candidate.

How then to evaluate a candidate's résumé? First, look at his university, the name of his company, his job progression, and his track record. Look to see if the months and years are given. The Japanese tend to write up their résumés with the first job at the beginning—and moving on through the last job. Many professionals in the West prefer a résumé that discusses accomplishments (such as, "designed blah, blah, blah" or "cut back costs by 20%"), but that sort of résumé is rare in Japan.

Evaluating this sort of information may require research on your part. Find out to whom the individual reports (or reported in the past). Find out how many subordinates there are (or were). If possible, find out how quickly he was promoted in comparison with his peers. Sometimes, this information is not as obvious on a résumé as it should be—so don't hesitate to ask. If, in fact, this man was in the first group to become *kacho* (section chief) at his age level, a headhunter should have asked that, known that, and sold it to you already. If this young man or woman has been the computer salesperson of the month rather consistently, it would be a shame not to know that.

Another rule of thumb: When in doubt, meet. But tread carefully in that personal interview, again taking account of Japanese culture.

Do not screen out a candidate because his language skills are not up to par—or because he has not tried to sell himself to you. Although there are exceptions, the best Japanese—those who have done a good job throughout their careers—usually will simply sit tight and not feel that they have to prove this to you, especially when they don't need your job and are just as happy staying where they are.

So while the interview normally plays an important role in making a decision (in the US, counting for 70% and track-record and references for 30%), in Japan, the interview you conduct should be discounted to a weight of only 35% in your overall evaluation.

Remember that if the chemistry doesn't seem right, maybe it doesn't have to be completely right. What matters when you hire in Japan is not your chemistry with your Japanese employee. What matters is whether the chemistry is right for this would-be employee to get along with your Japanese employees and managers—and to make the right impression on your Japanese customers.

As a result, your antennae of caution should rise whenever you see a Japanese résumé that is too detailed and too well-written, and you meet a candidate who presents himself extremely well. That

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résumé may have been written by a professional outplacement agency.

In a word, discount the chemistry of the interview, the quality of the résumé. Instead, check up on the positioning of the candidate's firm within the social and business hierarchy of Japan. Determine the exact Japanese title of the candidate, and make sure that he is has a "line"—and not a staff function.

If you are looking for a powerful "line" manager, be cautious about candidates whose Japanese-language titles include the word *taigu* (literally, "treatment"); that means their job may be like a *bucho*, ("department head") but not really as responsible as that of a *bucho*, with his usual subordinates. Similarly, *tsuki* (literally "attached") at the end of a job title simply means that the job-candidate was "attached to" that position—such as attached to a *bucho*, but not really a *bucho*. "*Hosa*" (literally, "assisting") and *sanji*, *fukusanyo*, and *sanyo* are other titles that should bring up a red flag because they describe positions that are not critical to an organization—staff/status qualification titles, rather than line-management titles such as *kacho* (section chief) or *bucho*.

Be aware, moreover, that the English-language titles on the résumé or application are essentially irrelevant, no matter how familiar they are to you.

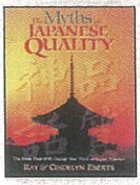
Above all else, look at the candidate's track record and his Japanese title. Learn what the man is actually doing, and discount those résumés and interviews.

JAPAN BOOK REVIEW:

The Myths of Japanese Quality: The Book That Will Change Your View of Japan, Forever

by Ray and Cindelyn Eberts

Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall/Simon & Schuster, 1995. 338 pages. US$24.95 hardback. To order, in the US, tel (1) 800.223.1360.



Invariably, the headlines of the 1980s related the "superiority" of Japan's educational system, its products, and its workforce. But industrial engineer Ray Eberts and his wife, Cindelyn, a PhD in psychology, discovered a different sort of Japan when they went there to live and work. Although few consumers knew it, a Honda car was almost 13 times more likely to be recalled than was a GM car in 1993. That's because American automakers are six times more likely than Japanese automakers to announce publicly their recalls. The authors also find no evidence that Japanese students learn more in school. In fact, US high school graduates are 60% more likely to attend college. This is an impressive, readable book which examines "myths" that have come to be accepted as fact.