

The Japanese Executive Search Trap

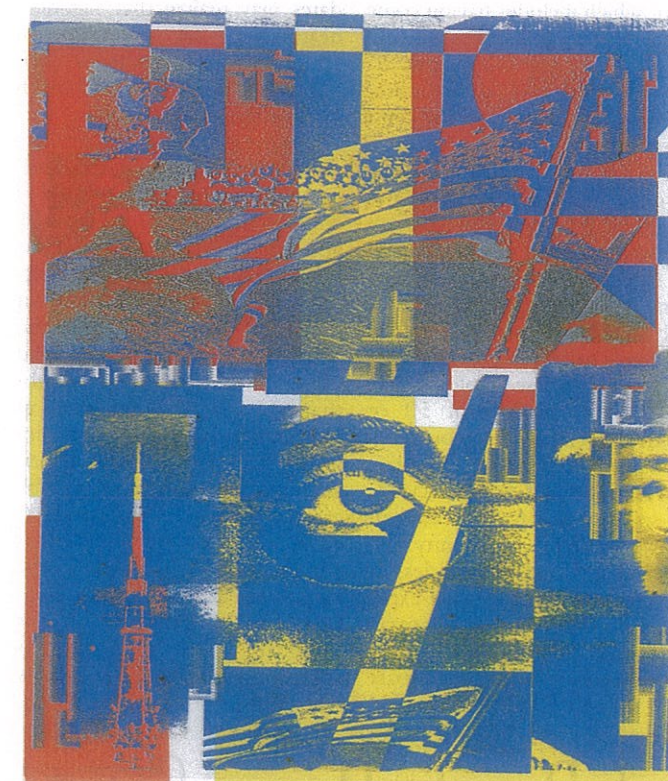
CULTURE SHOCK

Recently within the same week, two of our Western clients made glaring but rather typical hiring mistakes. These were both extremely bright and sophisticated clients who in their home country and in many other countries around the world would have made the right hiring decisions. The mistakes they made here in Japan, however, were so big, costly, and unnecessary that I vowed to put pen to paper about them the very next weekend.

In the case of the first company, a leading high-tech concern, several of our executive search consultants had put up as many as 11 experienced and talented managers from similar companies. Most of these candidates had never changed jobs. Two of them had changed once. The last was admittedly a job-hopper, put up after the first round by our discouraged consultants when their other candidates failed to enthruse the client.

Bingo, the job-hopper was given the nod and whisked off to the home country for orientation. Why? Because the client was impressed by the man's excellent English and his ability to creatively display his vision and sell himself.

Three of the candidates we



BY THOMAS J. NEVINS

originally slated were from a major Japanese computer company. A consultant of ours who had worked with them for three years testified that on a scale of one to ten, they were "definitely No. 1." To no avail. A good line in English, the right chemistry, and overemphasis on the interview itself rather than on background and track record won the day.

I should have stopped this, but we did have a good reference from the chosen candidate's last employer. Still, I knew that the first candidates we'd sug-

gested were superior. I asked the client why he'd chosen as he had. "He was the only one I could see representing my firm as my general manager in Japan," I was told. Within a month the honeymoon was over, though, and the client was back for a replacement—which we probably shouldn't have had to do free of charge.

In the second case, a well-established multinational with more than 1,000 employees in Japan was looking for two or three top-level executives. I had heard off and on that a very

senior executive had been hired through another headhunter and had been training abroad for a few months.

The day the company flew into Tokyo to interview our candidates, I managed to find out who had been hired. The news was startling. The company had picked up a classic con man who had flitted about the multinational foreign capitalized labor market in Tokyo for years, stealing money, using aliases, and getting fired several times. He was, I heard, introduced by a "prominent and reputable Japanese headhunter." Evidence against the con man was readily available, however; and with our help the problem was cleared up that week.

Once again, this second client made its mistake because it was looking for the wrong things. The candidate's personal track record and the standing of his company took a back seat to silver-tongued oratorical skills in English and good chemistry in the interview. But in Japan, the doers are often not talkers, at least not in English. Here, good, solid candidates must have their arms twisted to come to interviews. They have never thought about changing jobs, are not too good at interviews, and do not try as hard to sell

themselves, even when their English is adequate.

When a Western business executive hires someone in Europe or in the United States, he is looking for the right chemistry and fit, as he should. He does this, however, after other more important things are already in place. For example, the companies in the industry are known, including the relative standing of the candidate's company.

But it's easy to lie to someone from a different race and culture. Even a big lie might be accepted by foreigners who don't know much about local companies and local industry and who have proven time and time again that they can't easily check up on background and references—or won't bother to. The client that slipped up and hired the con man, for instance, normally hires its Western executives from leading companies only. A simple lack of knowledge or interest in the background of the Japanese candidate, including the size of his company, resulted in the hiring of a man whose last position was with a small firm of 200.

It isn't easy for the expatriate or visiting Western executive to make a culturally and socially sound hire in Japan. For example, if you are hiring someone

**In Japan, the doers
are often not talkers; and solid
candidates are not too good
at interviews.**

to go into a major company with several thousand or even several hundred Japanese employees, you will almost always fail unless you bring in a recruit of sufficient caliber in a Japanese context, which includes having come from the right university and from a yet larger concern.

It is often said foreign companies cannot attract the best Japanese human resources. Although this is true at the entry level, with proper scouting and handling it is possible to bring in top midcareer hires. In fact, a foreign-based multinational with only 50 employees is probably three or four times more attractive to a key performer from a leading Japanese employer than an indigenous firm of 50 or even 500 employees would be.

Several reputable executive search firms in Tokyo specialize in serving the foreign capitalized corporate community. If you use them, you'll be less at risk, for the multinational expatriate community is largely governed by reputation. A recruiting firm whose client base

comprises primarily indigenous Japanese companies, however, may be more likely to try to pawn off a weak or even dishonest candidate on foreign companies. Furthermore, disreputable candidates may realize that Japanese headhunters are not likely to know about instances of job-hopping and repeated failure in foreign-owned businesses.

Asian businessmen are aggressive. This is a rough-and-tumble market. And you are a babe in the woods. Make sure you ask tough and direct questions of both the candidate sitting in front of you and of your executive search firm. If the candidate is a job-hopper and there is any room for doubt that he is not now employed as indicated in his resume, ask him for his company phone number, assuring him that you will be careful. Be sure and get references and phone numbers at all the companies where the individual worked in the past. Often this is enough. If the candidate calls in and says he is not interested or doesn't show

up for the next interview, you'll have a pretty good idea why.

Here it matters less what a man says or how he sells himself. Look at what he's done and what he is doing. His record should include no more than one to three companies at the most. It is also helpful if he at least started his career with a leading, well-recognized Japanese or major foreign-capitalized employer. This kind of attention to detail will set you well on the path toward a successful hire and will be greeted with an acceptable level of credibility by your Japanese staff.

Most important, remember that the basis of your decision must not be the interview and the way the individual comes across. Chemistry, charisma, ability to communicate in an interesting way in English, or even to answer logically in English, are largely cultural exercises; yet the culture in which the individual is expected to establish or make a company grow is not your own.

THOMAS J. NEVINS is founder and president of TMT, Inc., a Tokyo-based personnel policy consulting and executive search firm. This article is an abridged excerpt from his latest book, Taking Charge in Japan (Japan Times, December 1990).

The ABCs of People Power Start with ABS.



When it comes to solving people problems, ABS means business. We have the skilled staff you need, when and where you need them, to keep your business running smoothly.

From computer operators to receptionists to executive secretaries. We provide people solutions.

More power to you. From the people professionals at ABS.



15th Fl. Shinjuku Sanei Bldg., 22-2, Nishi-Shinjuku 1-chome, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo 160 Japan

Asahi Business Staff, Inc. (03) 344-3441