

Hunting Japan's Elusive Graduates

Each year, corporate recruiters compete to hire the best graduates from Japan's top universities. But as the labor shortage worsens, it becomes ever harder to fulfill hiring quotas, particularly for newer and less-established foreign companies.

Continuing a special series inaugurated in the May issue, *FocusJapan* has drawn on the expertise of Tokyo-based labor consultant Thomas Nevins for this report on college recruiting, condensed from his recent book, *Taking Charge in Japan*.

Mission Impossible?

The rule of thumb among expatriate executives in Japan is that unless your company has been in Japan 10 years and has 200 staff, it's nearly impossible to recruit university seniors upon graduation. Each year 6,000 companies vie to recruit 4,000 Keio University seniors. While some get over 100 recruits, only 900 firms manage to hire even a single Keio grad. At Tokyo Institute of Technology (TIT), the MIT of Japan, one report revealed that 139 firms made 3,450 job offers to 226 engineering grads.

You will likely find it's a mistake to attempt recruiting from the universities until your firm has sufficient size and stature in Japan to attract good graduates (or until you have adequate personnel staff to do it properly). Until you're sure, don't bother. Rather than bring in the dregs of the bunch and be stuck with them for life in this land of "lifetime employment," you might be better off using professional executive search firms to bring in mid-career hires.

Timing is everything. If within a few years your firm plans to have much more impressive facilities in terms of bricks and mortar, employee head count, etc. — then *wait*. Rather than telling your story to students and professors before it's an impressive one, wait till you have something to really brag about. Unfortunately, first impressions are indelible ones.

When You're Ready . . .

But for those who are ready to pursue Japan's elusive grads, the starting point should be to develop good relations with influential professors and university placement offices. The key to good relations is to be consistent: you must go back to them each year, or your credibility will be lost.

Success is difficult in this environment, but foreign firms may find promising opportunities among female graduates.

Even though each male grad typically receives several offers, there are actually some female four-year university graduates who cannot secure employment.

Corporate demand for female labor tends to focus on two-year college and high school grads. Four-year graduate women are less in demand presumably because Japanese firms feel that women entering the company at 22 or 23 are too close to the usual age of marriage. Thus, company training will not bear sufficient fruit and the negative impact of premature turnover will be too great.

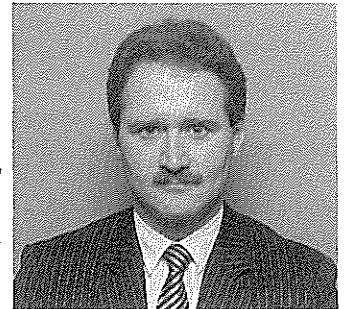
I would also recommend that multinationals in Japan not be overly concerned with getting people from the very top universities. Intelligence as determined by an ability to pass the difficult paper entrance exams required to secure enrollment at these institutions will always take a back seat to effort, drive and a good personality.

A word of caution. If you hire a new graduate, it is legally more difficult to weed him out during the probationary period than a mid-career hire because the courts look upon corporate responsibilities to new grads differently. Traditionally, Japanese grads only had one chance in a lifetime to secure employment with a major employer. The notion is that this student has given up his once-in-a-lifetime chance to join a prestigious firm to work for you.

Wining and Dining

Since you will initially need at most a handful of new grads, focus on one or two schools and work closely with one or two professors. This is particularly true for engineering faculties. Many firms wine and dine professors to build good relations. But a creative foreign firm could go one step further and arrange a trip to the head office in Paris or New York, along with consulting arrangements or contributions of equipment to assist his research work.

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