Career Perspective: Motivation of Chinese Employees Graduating from Chinese Universities and Working for Japanese Companies

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Abstract: The survey of Chinese employees working for Japanese companies and graduating from universities in China revealed that factors such as intercultural gap, Japanese ability, and workplace human relations have limited correlation with the 4-faceted motivation scores. The existence of career perspectives did however appear to relate to motivation scores including learning. The reason for low motivation scores of Chinese employees derived from the fact that they had limited opportunities for participating in job fairs during their job search, or communicating with senior employees. Due to the absence of a

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career perspective, employees were dissatisfied with their day-to-day work after joining the companies.

Keywords: Chinese university, Japanese company, career perspective, 4-faceted motivation

Introduction

Japanese firms in recent years have been hiring people with diverse attributes in terms of gender, age, and nationality, resulting in a focus on diversity management (Hotta, 2015) and extended/broad minorities, including the disabled (Iwama & Yu, 2007; Takeda, 2010). With regard to foreigners in particular, 25.8% of Japanese companies hiring skilled foreigners recruited or planned to recruit foreigners graduating from overseas universities in 2019 (Disco, 2020). Hiring students who graduated from overseas universities generally tend to be concerned about their Japanese ability and whether they can understand Japanese society and ideas (Nakajima, 2016). Other studies have pointed out problems in the workplace such as sense of commitment (Koyama, 2017); gap with Japanese employees (Tokunaga, 2009); fitting into the organization (Shimada, 2017; Miyagi & Nakai, 2017), motivation (Guo, 2015; Takimoto, Irie, & Wang, 2013).

In this study, we conducted interviews with Chinese employees working in Japan who were graduates of Chinese universities and graduate schools about their motivations and the underlying factors. Surprisingly, we found that motivational factors as mentioned in earlier studies were not so related, and whether or not employees had a career perspective affected their motivations. The survey we conducted with Chinese employees with low motivation scores revealed that restricted opportunities for attending job fairs

during their job search, or having limited chance for communication with senior employees resulted in their absence of career perspective causing dissatisfaction with their day-to-day work after joining the companies.

Method

In previous studies about foreign employees, the concept of motivation is ambiguous. In research on motivation, however, Mitchell (1997) defines motivation as “psychological processes involved with the arousal, direction, intensity, and persistence of voluntary actions that are goal directed” (Mitchell, 1997, p. 60), and the definition has become widely accepted (Barrick, Stewart, & Piotrowski, 2002; Pinder, 2008; Ikeda & Morinaga, 2017). Kanfer, Chen, and Pritchard (2008) reduce the four processes of Mitchell (1997) down to direction, intensity, and persistence, and Ikeda and Morinaga (2017) provide Japanese translations and revisions to the measures from Barrick et al. (2002) for these three processes, adding learning process as new measures, to create a draft set of 4-faceted $\times$ 15 items = 60 items. Furthermore, they reduced it into 4-faceted $\times$ 9 items = 36 items, and adopted it as the final measures based on factor analysis. In our study, we used 4-faceted $\times$ 3 items = 12 items among those as motivation measures as follows:

Competition

- Q1. I would be happy if I could achieve better performance (achievements or evaluations) than my coworkers.
- Q2. I never give up trying to improve my productivity until I achieve better performance (achievements or appraisals) than my coworkers.
- Q3. I understand what to do to achieve better performance (achievements or appraisals) than my coworkers.

Cooperation

Q4. I am always trying to get along with everyone.

Q5. I care a lot about cooperating with my coworkers and superiors.

Q6. I think about ways to better cooperate with my coworkers and superiors.

Learning

Q7. I think about what I can do to be able to grow myself even further.

Q8. I devote energy to growing even further.

Q9. I maintain a learning attitude even when things are not going well at work.

Accomplishment

Q10. I try hard to get my job done.

Q11. I am engaged in my job and feel completely satisfied after completing the job given to me.

Q12. I understand how carrying out my job contributes to my coworkers, workplace, and organization.

We interviewed a total of eight people from three companies, A1 and A2 from Company A in the education industry; B1 and B2 from Company B in the newspaper industry, and C1, C2, C3, and C4 from Company C in the consulting industry. The interviews were carried out over WeChat between August 28 and September 26, 2020, lasting 60–90 minutes each. In advance of the interview, we sent out questionnaires in Japanese and Chinese asking for personal information including name, gender, age, number of years in Japan, university and department or graduate school and research area they finished, company where currently employed, division and title of current employment, number of people in division, ratio of foreign employees, experience as an overseas (Japan) exchange student and length thereof, and whether they held the N1 certificate in the Japanese Language Proficiency Exam.

In the interviews, we primarily asked about work before coming to Japan and at present, in the process of which we asked the subjects to rate the twelve items of the motivation measures described above on a scale of “not at all” (1) to “definitely” (5), also delving into why they felt that way.

Results

All the interview subjects were women who had been on exchange student programs in Japanese universities. Seven of the eight came from Japanese departments, with four having completed their undergraduate studies and four graduate studies. Two were 24, two were 25, three were 26, and one was 28 years old, with the three from Company C having worked for one year, the other five two years. The 4-faceted motivation scores are shown in Figure 1.

First, we consider the factors that may affect 4-faceted motivation

Figure 1. 4-faceted motivation scores of interviewees

(competition, cooperation, accomplishment, and learning). Previous studies on foreigners working in Japan had suggested factors such as culture gap (Guo, 2015; Nabeshima, 2016; Suzuki, 2017; Tokunaga, 2009); Japanese ability (Tokunaga, 2009); and human relations at the workplace (Miyagi & Nakai, 2017; Shimada, 2017; Takimoto et al., 2013). Surprisingly, however, we found almost no relationship with 4-faceted motivation scores.

For example, earlier studies suggested culture gap as a factor affecting motivation. It did exist, according to our interviews: B1 mentioned that Japanese employees spoke so vaguely that she could not understand what they really wanted to say, and that immediately after joining the company, she did not get used to “Ho-ren-so”, a basic Japanese business guideline: *Hokoku* (report), *renraku* (contact), and *sodan* (consult); A2 told us that she was the first Chinese graduated from a Chinese university or graduate school in her division, and that the way she thought was not really understood there sometimes, and admitted being fatigued by interpersonal relationships at the workplace. In fact, though, both had above-average motivation scores.

The handicap involving Japanese ability actually worked the other way. Most people answered that precisely because they were conscious of it, they prioritized completing their work so not to inconvenience other people, working until the very end.

With regard to interpersonal relationships at the workplace, most people said that given that the workplace is a team, it would be strange to have competition internal to the team, giving as reasons that (a) work is appraised against objectives set by oneself; (b) there was no one else of the same rank in the team to compare against; and (c) comparisons were impossible because the work of other colleagues who joined the company at the same time and their work are different by nature. In fact, A1, who had the lowest competition-oriented score, said that appraisals of her work were based on the

accomplishments of the team, and since the other team members were her seniors, now was the time to learn from them, and B1 told us that she just did the work she was assigned without thinking about competing.

We also asked in the interviews whether there were cases of foreigners being discriminated against as a minority, such as not being given important work to do, or not being invited to after-work drinks, but found that almost none of eight people had experienced such discrimination at their company.

Career Perspective and Learning

Since we found almost no relationship between 4-faceted motivation scores and the factors which previous studies had pointed out to affect motivation for foreign employees working in Japan, we look at motivation from a different viewpoint and compared C2 and C4, two subjects with contrasting 4-faceted motivation scores. Both worked for Company C, so arguably had nearly identical company systems and environments, yet as seen in Figure 1, C4 had the highest scores in competition, cooperation, accomplishment, and learning, whereas C2 had the lowest scores in accomplishment and learning and the second-lowest in competition and cooperation. Whence this difference? From the interviews, it seemed that the disparity in motivation scores might have come from whether they had a career perspective.

C4 had the career perspective of wanting to become an expatriate, and learned things outside her current work and communicated with seniors. In practice, like C4, having a future career perspective rather than focusing on the current day-to-day work is likely to increase a learning-oriented motivation score. Moreover, A2, who had the highest learning-oriented motivation score along with C4, answered that she was studying English to be able to go to a division

where she could work in international operations in the future.

In contrast C2 had decided to seek work in Japan, citing as a reason her desire to live there and her interest in Japanese culture, with no clear career perspective. If anything, she went so far as to tell us, when things got busy at work, she had no time to enjoy her life in Japan and its culture. Her only objective was to complete her day-to-day tasks, saying “I wish I could complete my work. I do not want to interact with people who joined the company at the same time, and I do not want to be noticed.” Thus, without a career perspective, the willingness to gain more knowledge than it is necessary for the current job is diminished.

What we must note here is that even C2, who had the lowest learning-oriented score, told us that she always listened to her seniors and learned by herself, and A1, with the second-lowest learning-oriented score, also said that it obvious to learn things she did not understand at work, but she said that not studying other things would not affect her current work or her bonus. In other words, a future career perspective amplifies the motivation to learn above and beyond what one does not understand in their job.

In particular, Chinese people are said to place importance on 發展空間 (发展空间 *fāzhǎn kōngjiān* in Chinese) meaning “development space” (Recruit Works Institute, 2013, p. 14; Ma, 2020). However, the importance of perspective is not limited to Chinese. In fact, Takahashi (1996, 2013, 2014) and Takahashi, Ohkawa, and Inamizu (2014) pointed out that perspective is important for motivation, and show that job satisfaction ratio and turnover candidate ratio can be explained by perspective index from Japanese survey data.¹ Takahashi (2013) proposes a decision principle called the *leaning on future principle*, “along which people choose a better future rather

¹ For perspective index, see the survey data and validation from Okada and Inamizu (2014), Takahashi (2018a, 2018b, 2019, 2020), and Takahashi, Ohkawa, Inamizu, and Akiike (2013) as well.

than act through present mercenary motives based on the past results” (Takahashi, 2013, p. 284). In other words, for people with perspective, the future outlook and prospects are more important than whether they are satisfied or dissatisfied with their day-to-day work, or whether to quit or not. Even if their daily work seems to be monotonous, they put up with it with the positive attitude that it will be a good experience for them in the future.

Problems of the Recruitment Process

Let us next look at B2 and C3 who have low motivation scores. B2 said, “When I was a student, I knew that a new graduate of a Japanese company has to do a basic job for a long time, but I did not care because I did not have a clear image of the job. However, at present, I am not satisfied with the basic work and want to do a more core work.” C3 also said, “I had an image of strategic consulting in advance, but most of my current work is system projects, and I am not interested in it. Still, I want people around me to approve it, so I will complete the work.” In both cases, the dissatisfaction with the job stemmed from the fact that there was no future career perspective (Takahashi, 1996, 2013).

In this way, when one does not have a future career perspective, motivation might be low if there is a large gap between the work one wants to do and the work one is doing at one’s current workplace. This gap seems to indicate a problem in the recruiting process. Our interview subjects used two routes: (a) overseas-oriented recruiting events (mainly Company B); and (b) job sites and recruiting agencies (mainly Companies A and C). Both routes usually combine an entry sheet, synthetic personality inventory (SPI) test, and interviews in China or Japan, but differ in their details. For example, for the first stage in looking for work in Japan, in general, one imagines that the company will explain various things at job

fairs. However, according to C3, the person of Company C gave no explanation at the job fair, and instead the recruiting site company gave a brief explanation of Company C; as a result, C3 said that the gap before and after joining Company C was indeed big.

Such situations are unlikely to occur in the case of Chinese employees who graduated from a Japanese university or graduate school. We performed additional interviews, using the same methodology, with three Chinese employees who had graduated from Japanese universities or graduate schools, between November 19 and 29, 2020. We spent 50–60 minutes each with C5 from Company C and D1 and D2 from Company D in the IT industry. Two of the subjects were 25 and one was 27 years old, two males and one female.

Since they were in Japan while job hunting, these Chinese graduates from Japanese universities and graduate schools, as the first step in their job search, were able to attend briefings held by the companies, or joint briefings. At the briefings, current employees introduced the company, providing a forum for communication with them. The second step, the interview process, the interview provided an opportunity for one-on-one communication with the existing employees and visits with the alumni of the same school. In the first place, Chinese students at Japanese universities and graduate schools have many seniors who also found employment in Japan from the same school, and they can communicate with each other. In fact, the work content of D1 from Company D in the IT industry is consulting, but D1 had this kind of career perspective from before joining the company, and was able to gradually narrow in on the field she was passionate about after joining, which is why she is currently satisfied with her job.

In the US, which takes a different recruiting method from Japan, research on Realistic Job Previews (RJP) that present information on the actual conditions of organizations and jobs including both good and bad aspects, has been conducted since the 1970s. This

originated from Weitz (1956) and has shown to increase fitness between the organization and newcomers, in addition to increasing the retention rate (Hotta, 2007). If it is not possible to realize the same recruitment process for Chinese graduates of Chinese universities as Chinese graduates of Japanese universities, it may be necessary to devise ways to adopt techniques, such as RJP.

Conclusion

As a result of the survey conducted on Chinese employees of Japanese firms who graduated from Chinese universities and graduate schools and work for Japanese companies, it was deduced that factors pointed out in previous studies such as culture gaps, Japanese ability, and workplace human relations, had little relevance to the 4-faceted motivation scores. The existence of a career perspective, however, was related to motivation scores, a learning-oriented score in particular. Chinese employees with low motivation scores derived from limited opportunities to attend company briefings held as part of the job-hunting process in Japan as well as restricted chances to communicate with employees already at the company, and the absence of a career perspective presumably revealed dissatisfaction with the day-to-day work after joining the company.

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