Job Training and Rotations in Japanese Manufacturing Organizations: A Qualitative Analysis*

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This study investigates employee perceptions of job training and rotations in Japanese manufacturing organizations. An attention is focused on the issue of how on-the-job training and job rotations operate in Japanese organizations, and whether these work activities motivate Japanese employees. The results from an analysis of qualitative data obtained from 40 Japanese employees suggest that on-the-job training and job rotations operate without causing major employee dissatisfaction, despite the fact that employees receive no substantive rewards for these work activities. Institutional factors embedded in the workplace, such as norms governing co-worker relations, appear to be important prerequisites for sustaining the system of skill formation in Japan. The results also indicate that on-the-job training and job rotations do not necessarily enhance employees' work motivation. Japanese employees tend to view co-worker training as a burden. Job rotations seem to discourage employees when they are obliged to move against their will.

INTRODUCTION

Employee acquisition of job skills has been one of the most pervasive research topics among organization scholars (Althauser, 1989; Althauser and Kalleberg, 1981; Bailey and Waldinger, 1991; Cole, 1992; Knoke and Kalleberg, 1994; Koike, 1984; Wood, 1989). While the system of skill formation in Japanese organizations has received considerable attention (Cole, 1992; Koike, 1988; Wood, 1989), almost all discussions have focused on the structural mechanisms through which Japanese management harnesses employee skills. At present, there is no major research as to micro processes of skill attainment in Japanese firms, i.e., how individual Japanese employees perceive the way they acquire job skills.

An assessment of employee experiences in skill formation takes significance in two aspects. First, it sheds light on the question why the present system of skill formation works in Japanese organizations without conflicts. Not only management emphasis on employee multi-skilling could lead to labor intensification, it may also threaten the employment security for peripheral work force. Then, why does the system of skill formation in Japan cause no major management-labor conflicts? Do Japanese employees attach meanings to skills that are compatible with management goals?

Secondly, an exploration of individual perceptions of skill attainment illuminates how institutional forces in the workplace constrain employees. One possible constraining factor may be an employee's coworker relations. Although previous research suggests that skill acquisition in Japanese workplaces necessarily involves interactions among coworkers (Koike and Inoki, 1990), little has been studied how interpersonal relations
among coworkers affect individual attitudes towards skill attainment. We still have no clear knowledge about to what extent institutional factors in workplaces are an integral part of the skill formation system in Japanese organizations.

Thus in this research, I investigate in an exploratory fashion Japanese manufacturing employees' perceptions of skill attainment and job training. Specifically, I focus on employees' experiences in on-the-job training (OJT) and job rotations to address the following general questions: (1) How does employee training operate in Japanese factories? (2) What are the factors that are indispensable to maintain employee training effective in Japanese factories? (3) Does skill acquisition always motivate Japanese employees, and if not, why?

METHOD

The qualitative data used in this study were collected among Japanese manufacturing employees between June and July 1993. Intensive interviews with Japanese employees were carried out to obtain qualitative information on individual experiences of on-the-job training, and job rotations.

1. Settings The first stage of my sampling procedure was to select manufacturing companies. I purposively limited the sampling frame to the companies in the Tokai region, largely due to my personal familiarity with the local geography of the region. Also, the Tokai region is one of the centers of Japanese manufacturing industry, especially for the automobile industry. After carefully examining several companies, four plants from three major manufacturing firms were selected for employee interviews. These companies were selected primarily because of their reputation in employee training and total quality control programs. The number of employees worked in the selected plants ranged between 1,161 and 4,000. Although each plant studied consisted of several product divisions, I was obliged to interview employees from one division only. I had no control over the selection of divisions, because some divisions were very busy at the time of interviews and only slower divisions could cooperate. Due to the diversity in geographic locations of the plants selected (Aichi, Mie, and Shizuoka prefectures), the potential threat of information contamination by response bias of local employees could be ruled out.

2. Selection of Subjects Because company employee rosters included confidential personal information, direct access to the roster was not permitted in the four plants selected. Instead, personnel from human resource department randomly selected samples based on my three requests: (1) ten employees to be selected (five men and five women), (2) at least two married employees to be selected in each gender, and (3) among the married employees, those with children preferred. I also requested that they select one foreman among the ten employees. Human resources department informed me each interviewee's background information, including tenure, divisional affiliation, marital status, and number of children.

3. Data Interviewing was carried out in a conference room reserved for interviews. Although the room was located in a plant building, it was minimally bothered by the noise of machines, telephones, and other meetings. Prior to the meetings, human resources had notified each employee selected the time and the place of interviews through foreman. On the day interview was carried out, the foreman told each interviewee to show up in the room in time for the scheduled interview. All conversations during interviews were recorded by a micro tape recorder. No notes were taken in order to make rapport with interviewees. Each interview took approximately thirty to forty-five minutes.

The questions in interviews focused on two major issues: (1) experiences of OJT — importance, impacts on workplace human relations, and rewards, (2) experiences of job rotations — frequencies, types, importance, impacts on work-
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place human relations, negative effects, and rewards. The qualitative data collected in the above explained interviews were analyzed through standard content analysis.

RESULTS

1. On-the-Job Training

Fujimoto (1993) found that the effect of perceived importance of OJT on job satisfaction was smaller for Japanese employees than for Americans. He revealed that there was a large discrepancy in the average level of OJT importance between the Japanese and Americans, and that being Japanese significantly decreased the likelihood of perceiving OJT to be important, among both genders. These results led me to question whether perceiving OJT to be important readily means that employees are motivated, and whether and how the employees felt inhibited or constrained by the responsibilities imposed when attaining job skills.

The first question asked whether respondents had any goals that they had to achieve through OJT. The vast majority of men and women indicated quantifiable goals. The two most common goals were to achieve the assigned daily number of outputs, and to reduce the number of defective products. A 36-year-old male employee stated:

Goals are always numbers; My goal is never like, “I become able to do something.” It does not matter how you achieve them, but the goal is “x” number... When I first see the number, I feel I can never make it, but I try to study why I cannot do it, in order to find the problem and make improvements.

Individual employees also pledge annual goals in a written form to their foreman once a year. Such individual goals are mostly concerned with how to reduce defective products.

Once a year, I must write down precisely how many defective products I will reduce during that year. If I can not reach that number, they will make me write the reason. And I have to try to reach that target number until I clear it.

The quantified goals for employees reflect the company’s monthly production schedules. Therefore, the goals do not necessarily match employees’ personal goals as such. While some employees scarcely think about or question the mismatch, others experience dissatisfaction from the mismatch.

I have never thought whether training goals match with my own personal goals. Goals are something that come as a part of my job...

(35-year-old man)

The number they [management] demand us to output is not properly computed... For instance, even if we have new production equipments, meaning a longer cycle-time than before, the number we have to produce is still the same as before... This is not right. (38-year-old man)

In most cases, senior workers, not foremen or supervisors, assisted to train novice employees. A Senpai (senior employee), was the key person in the training of new workers. Training usually focuses on either machine or manual operations. A Senpai assists a novice Kohai (junior employee) for a limited time, approximately a week to a month. It is nearly impossible to cover all the minute aspects of the job in such a short training period, and therefore novice employees are encouraged to ask questions of their Senpai whenever problems arise.

The training ability of a senior worker influences the quality of the products that the novice employee produces, or more generally, the quality of the novice as a worker. A 42-year old male foreman stated:

To advise subordinates requires experiences and know-how. These are everything. Your subordinates will not listen to you unless you give them precise advice. If you just show them manuals and say “Well, let’s see, I don’t know...”, they do not learn it at all. You have to work with them, telling them things like, “Let’s look at it together”, or “Let’s ask

(31-year-old woman)
someone who knows more about this equipment”. It is important that I assist my subordinates by actually examining the problem with them.

A 25-year-old female machinist:

If a good Senpai teaches me, I will also teach my Kohai carefully. But if I had a short-tempered Senpai, I will also teach my Kohai in a similar way.

Although foremen are not directly involved in the training of novice workers, frequent rotations of foremen may cause problems in a line. Due to the absence of an experienced superior, a younger, less-skilled worker often takes on all the responsibility of training new workers in a sub-line. One 22-year-old female product quality inspector mentioned:

My superiors have kept changing because of their frequent rotations. So, I always have to train new ones. But after a little while, they usually do not come back to ask me questions. They may have pride, you know, I’m still young. But then they make mistakes. Teaching things to older employees is particularly difficult. When I teach them about half of what I have to, they start saying, “Okay, okay I understand everything”, and they do things wrong ...

Training does not always work smoothly. It sometimes affects Senpai-kohai relationships:

When my Kohai masters things that I have taught, I feel all my efforts are paid off. But this is not always the case. Sometimes, interpersonal relations get worse, particularly when they don’t learn what I teach them. (28-year-old man)

Management policy on OJT in each company seems to have a strong influence on whether employees are assigned with training goals in their jobs. However, individual foreman’s willingness to train employees may be an equally important factor. Differences in supervisory attitudes towards training cause differential outcomes of training, especially among women. One 48-year-old woman said:

My boss told me to learn how to use Lotus I, II and III. He is now teaching it to me on the person-to-person basis... Because I love my job, and, you know, it is like my hobby, I am happy that they let me learn it... But I had to spend my own money to go to outside school to study computers.

Another 22-year-old woman claimed:

I have no assigned goals in my job. At work I barely speak with my boss. He just tells me, “Do this next,” and I say, “Yes.” When I think that I would have to continue doing this for three more years [before her marriage], I feel sad, you know.

(Did they ever explain to you how other jobs are related to yours?)

When I joined this company, they explained to me the preceding and the following job processes for about five minutes. But that’s about it.

Safety is another aspect emphasized in OJT. Whether a worker thoroughly masters safe operation affects a foreman’s evaluation of the worker’s reliability. A young female machine operator (25 years old) told me that the primary goal in her job was to operate the machine safely. She is the first female machine operator in her section.

Unlike other women, I am responsible for one machine, all by myself. Since I am the first woman machinist in our section and they allow me to fix machines, to a certain degree, I tend to be very careful about injuries. You know, if I get injured, other women would have difficulty getting a job here in the future. So, I try to ask someone whatever I do not know, besides what they taught me... To tell you the truth, I want to become able to handle everything, but my superior says that is too dangerous... At first, he told me that he does
not let a woman take care of a machine. But I felt very proud when my boss told me, “I will leave this machine to you, because I trust you as an operator.” This is very encouraging. This really is my driving force...

Since standardized manuals are rarely used in OJT, employees develop their own ways of training new workers. Depending on the case, two different employees may undertake training of a novice worker. This can be a problem if the two trainers teach the same thing in very different ways, which could cause confusion for the trainee and interpersonal tensions. A female employee mentioned how she tried to avoid such a problem:

During my maternity leave, a new worker took over my job. Someone else trained this new one in a very different way from what I usually do. When I returned to work after the leave, although I wanted to teach her a better way to do the job, I did not know how to advise her because I was not sure how she had been trained. So, I had to first ask the person who trained her what and how she taught her, and then I advised her on how to do the job better. I had to do this because inter-personal troubles could occur depending on how she took my advice. (30-year-old woman)

Women generally appeared to be more cautious about maintaining smooth interpersonal relations in training than men. A 32-year-old female parts receptionist mentioned:

The people I work with now in this parts receptionist job are predominantly female. Since women employees teach me things, you know sometimes their language is rough, so I have had several bitter experiences with them.

A 23-year-old female:

Employees in our section are all women. There are those who are about my mother’s age. Sometimes we have problems between us...

To the question “Do you think that OJT is an indispensable part of your job?”, almost all respondents gave a positive answer. They thought that they simply could not perform their jobs without OJT. Several employees, however, told me more specific reasons for the importance of OJT for their jobs. One 36-year-old male line leader remarked:

Unless everyone is well trained as a team, the team itself will fall apart when, for example, the foreman of the team moves to somewhere else. So, the level to which all team members are trained does influence the quality of the workplace as a whole.

A 26-year-old male employee:

If you don’t train others, you yourself can’t take time off to relax. If you have trained your Kohai, they will probably cover your job even when you take paid vacations.

A 29-year-old male line leader:

If my Kohai does not keep up with the speed and the output goals, my superior will give me pressure to catch up.

From a superior’s point of view, careful training of subordinates may not necessarily be rewarding. To the question, “Does careful subordinate training affect how your superior evaluates you?”, a 41-year-old male foreman responded:

They (my superiors) are not concerned about how well I am training my subordinates. They just leave it up to me. Especially new recruits, they are totally up to me... I see little benefit for carefully training my subordinates.... Nobody tells you that I will get a pay raise if my line produces zero defective products... It is just taken for granted that I do a good job.

One of the major purposes of OJT is to secure employees who are capable of training others. This way, employers could reduce the costs of hiring training personnel. Although this system appears to be efficient on the surface, it does add an extra burden to the employees since training
their co-workers or Kohai requires time and energy. Therefore, it is possible that training responsibilities interfere with their regular job responsibilities. This is problematic particularly when they are busy with their own tasks.

I don’t have time to spare to train my Kohai. Eight hours are not enough to even finish my own work... It’s a big burden. You know, it’s nice to have other people on Oh-en (tentative support), but my time is taken up just to teach them things. The more time I spend in teaching, the more my work gets behind. I wish we had a person who exclusively trains Kohai, but even our foreman does not know our job well... (29-year-old man)

When I teach new things to my Kohai, they are slow at the beginning, you know. I, as a Senpai, am responsible to cover the delay in their work, so my workload increases. That makes me tired. It’s tough until I get used to it. (30-year-old woman)

Job Rotations

In many cases, rotating an employee to different jobs is built in as a part of the whole process of attaining multiple job skills (Koike, 1988). One assumption is that employees are generally reluctant about moving to a different job, and therefore the provision of reward (e.g., promotion) is an important incentive to motivate to move. By making this assumption, however, two important questions are overlooked. First, do rotations have the same meaning for all employees? Second, do rotations motivate employees and enhance skills even if rewards are not provided? Specifically, I address several questions: 1) who actually experiences rotations?, 2) do employees see rotations positively or negatively?, and 3) if they see rotations negatively, why? To address these questions, interview results are categorized into four parts: 1) typology of rotations, 2) perceived significance of rotations, 3) social-relational aspect of rotations, and 4) problems of rotations.

1) Typology of rotations

Rotations experienced by the employees in this sample included three types of job moves: inter-sectional (i.e., between sections that are specialized in different products), intra-sectional (i.e., within the same section, but between sub-lines), and intra-line (i.e., within the same sub-line, but between different job processes) moves. In general, rotations take place 1) when fluctuations in production volume occur and adjustments must be made by relocating workers, 2) when employees with specific skills/training backgrounds are needed in other sections or lines, and 3) when individual employees request job changes. The first type often takes the form of Oh-en (assigned workers are sent to different sections or lines to provide labor support for a limited period of time.) The provision of Oh-en support is negotiated at supervisory level. The period of Oh-en is relatively short, ranging from one day to several weeks. The second type of move occurs when company orders an employee to move. Management orders employees to move when products change or new production lines are built. Frequently, such moves are accompanied by promotions. The third type takes place only when one’s foreman agrees with and accepts the employee’s request, after considering both the employee’s job experiences and the team’s demand for his or her skills. In general, employees are informed about these decisions only a few days before he or she actually moves.

The economic recession of early 1990s considerably affected manufacturing industries in Japan. The companies selected for this study were not exceptions. Employees’ hours of overtime work were reduced to near zero, and some workers were obliged to move to different jobs. Such moves were either Oh-en or permanent moves ordered by the management without promotions.

Gradually, the number of products decreased, and the members of our team were reduced little by little... and I was the last woman who remained in the team. So, I thought I would be the next to be sent off. When there was a new line, I moved. (28-year-old woman)

Because of the recession, many people are
experiencing rotations. So, I am worried that it may happen to me, too... I am very concerned. Men may not feel this way, but I think women often have difficulty maintaining good human relations, you know. Also, I am worried whether I can really handle the new job... Well, maybe human relations are more important. I wonder what I really should do if I cannot mingle with the new people. (21-year-old woman)

When I joined this company, the economy was good. But now it’s getting worse, and our team has fallen apart [because of rotations]. We get less and less work to do, so I keep hearing about Oh-en these days.... Our foreman is saying that someone will have to be sent off this month and the next month, too. So, I wonder what I may be doing next month. I’ve been telling him that I do not want to move, but... (21-year-old woman)

In a time of recession, women seem to experience rotations, especially Oh-en, before men do. This resembles the management strategy to maintain the life-time employment system: women are laid off first during economic recessions. Generally, women accept the orders to move without complaining. However, women may be ready to quit the job if they do not like the new job. A 28-year-old woman mentioned:

(Do you want to move to do a particular job?)

No. I just move as they (my superiors) tell me to. Perhaps men think it’s easier to rotate women. Men have to work different shifts, like night shift. In that sense, women may cause less problems when they move...

(What if you are to experience the same kind of job rotations as men do?)

(Emphatically) I don’t want it! If I have to, I will quit the job. I think that men would accept any rotations because they have no choice, but women have a way out. In myself, I have an idea that I can always quit my job if I don’t like it after moving.

Employees feel that Oh-en moves may occur to someone who is no longer needed in the team. Foremen seem to want to keep “capable” workers as long as possible, whereas “incapable” ones tend be thrown out frequently, without learning much in a job. Therefore, employees are worried about being labeled an “incapable worker.”

It looks like those who are not favored by the section manager or supervisor tend to be thrown out. So, if I am going to be rotated, it makes me wonder whether that was the case with me, too... I guess foremen want to keep who is needed in the team. (21-year-old woman)

When I’m frequently rotated, it makes me feel that I may not be suited to such a job. And I get discouraged. Rotations that happen at a good time are fine, but if they change my job when I’m just getting used to it, I feel that they threw me out because I was a nuisance. I think that timing is very important. (21-year old woman)

To avoid being negatively labeled, a 48-year-old woman tries to make an extra effort on the job to impress her superior.

Because I do not want to leave my present job, I try to do my best in my job. Some people tell me things like, “Since you are a woman, you don’t need to work so hard.”..... I come to work early in the morning, I sometimes change my family schedules on weekends, and I also try to do what other people do not want to do..., all because I want my superior to like me and keep me here for a long time.

Two women in this sample had experienced inter-sectional rotations from production jobs to office jobs during their pregnancy. This move is a long-term Oh-en, because they returned to their original line production jobs after maternity leave. This worker-friendly policy should be welcome by many women who are willing to continue working. However, there is a pitfall in such a rotation policy. One of the two female
employees (30-year-old) complained:

It made sense to me that I received the smaller bonus when I was doing an easier office job on Oh-en during my pregnancy. But my bonus did not go back up to the prior amount even after I returned to my line work. I thought I would get the same amount as before, because I was doing my best in that job. I know that women tend to get little bonus raise after a certain length of employment. I spoke with the supervisor, and he told me that I could still catch up, but it was very discouraging to me. I am working hard, you know. If I am going to receive less, I want them to change me to an easier job.

The Japanese workers I interviewed appeared to tacitly admit that Oh-en is the synonym for job rotation for the most cases. Another type of move they frequently experienced was intra-line rotations built into daily line production work. Workers regularly rotated between different job processes in the same production line. They simply assumed that such small rotations were a part of their jobs.

In fact, promotion-linked rotations occurred considerably less frequently than other types of moves. At least in the four plants I studied, the seniority appeared to have the most powerful influence over employee promotions. Although age may not be the only determinant of promotions, customarily an employee would not be considered as a promotion candidate until he or she reaches a certain age. Therefore, job rotation occurs as a formality when one is promoted. One must survive Oh-en and other non-promotional rotations in order to be promoted.

(2) Perceived Significance of Rotations

The primary purpose of job rotations is to train employees to become multi-skilled. Therefore, upgrading of individual job skills is the key. The multi-skilling of workers, however, is not management’s ultimate goal. By increasing an employee’s capability to handle multiple jobs all by him/herself, reduction of manpower can be achieved. In what ways, then, are job rotations significant for employees? One of the most frequently mentioned answers was that job rotation facilitated job sharing among team members.

If I’m the only one who knows about the job I do, I would probably feel burdened when I have to take a day off because of my own or my child’s sickness, for instance. I would probably feel twice as burdened to find that my co-workers did not touch my job at all when I come back to work. I would be scared by the fact that I have to do everything left all by myself.... If everyone [in the team] knows about all the jobs to a certain extent, I could expect that someone will cover my job. Then, I can take vacation. (34-year-old woman)

... If somebody is absent, others can take over the job. For example, when a person is absent from work in a group of three, it is much easier if the other two could share the absentee’s job, rather than one person covering two jobs. (25-year-old woman)

Another frequent response was that rotation facilitates better knowledge of other workplaces and jobs of other employees.

If you just work in one place, you only know about that workplace. So, unless you move you will never know about other workplaces. I think this is a good experience... In our line, four of us rotate our jobs each time we take breaks during the day. So we know how tough other people’s jobs are... (30-year-old woman)

Similarly, one’s knowledge about a product increases along with rotations:

I think that rotations gave me very good experiences. First, I spent three years in the assembly of magnetic parts for motorcycles. After that, I was in the coil department for three years, and now I am here in the molding. So, I could see all the processes of making magnetic parts through rotations, and I now understand the product well. (27-year-old woman)
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Regular rotations built into daily work may help reduce workers' physical fatigue. Some employees experienced daily rotations in their own sub-line:

I feel less tired when I rotate to different jobs, about every two hours or so, each day... When I was working in a line before, I rotated jobs between the morning and the afternoon everyday. It was a good change of atmosphere... I think that a fixed pattern of rotations is necessary. I tend to become sleepy in the afternoons if the job is monotonous, so rotation is important to improve job efficiency. (34-year-old woman)

(3) Social Relation Aspect of Rotations

When employees rotate several related jobs, they become acquainted with other employees who share common knowledge about the jobs. Knowing other people makes it easier to ask things and request help, which eventually makes the job performance itself more efficient. Also by interacting with people of different ages and experiences, they learn how to work with others. Rotations, however, may cause tensions in human relations among employees.

I know some people who quit their jobs after moving to another group. They had built up good human relations in the old group, but they could not get along with the new members after they moved. I think they [foremen] should try to rotate workers first in a group, then depending on a person's aptitude, they should decide whether inter-group rotations are good for the person. They should consult the worker, also. (34-year-old woman)

Age is an important factor in inter-personal relations in Japanese workplaces. Some respondents mentioned about their concerns about working with employees from a different age group.

If I move to another job now, I would need to learn new things from people who are younger than I am. I guess they themselves would be cautious about the way they speak to an older person, though I personally have a negative feeling about having a younger person teach me... (25-year-old woman)

I had not had a new worker in my job for seven years, and now I really don't know how I should teach my Kohai. After working all by myself for seven years, I tend to take some things for granted in my job. But it is sometimes dangerous because new workers don't know much about safety. Also, an age gap between us makes it difficult to give warnings to them on the job. (38-year-old man)

I think that rotations become more difficult as one gets older. There is a person in my group who has a very strong personality, and he always complains that he does not want to do the same thing all day... But, it's difficult for me to argue with an older person. (48-year-old woman)

One's concern about becoming a burden in the new job/group may cause a negative attitude towards rotations.

The number of friends will increase as I rotate, but it's stressful that I have to start all over again, learning completely new things from the very beginning. It's easier for me to move within the same group, but I'm not sure if I want to move to an unknown job... In fact, I didn't want to leave on Oh-en because I didn't want to bother others, or become a burden to them. (21-year-old woman)

(4) Problems of Rotations

Not all employees expect job rotations. Some respondents expressed negative feelings about rotations. Such feelings appear to stem from the fact that rotations require learning new jobs. Particularly in the case of inter-sectional moves, they feel that the knowledge they acquired in the prior job is wasted.

When you move, you start it all over again,
and after a little while you move again and start it all over... so I don’t feel that I’m advancing to the higher job levels as a result of rotations. (35-year-old man)

Because some employees are not willing to move to another job, supervisory decisions about rotations sometimes cause conflicts. In most cases, however, employees end up accepting the supervisory order, despite their unwillingness.

I don’t particularly want rotations now. But if they order me to move, I cannot go against it. It’s like resignation. I don’t have a choice when they tell me to move. (40-year-old woman)

Frequent rotations of line operators add pressure to those who are responsible for their training. A 28-year-old male line leader complained:

They keep moving the people in my line... you know, I’m responsible for the line. I train people and they move, and new ones come in..... I really don’t have time to do my own work because I have to train them again. But my superior does not ask my opinions before rotating people.

For many, rotating to a different job in itself is stressful. Needless to say, moving to an undesirable job is discouraging. Job assignment based on an employee’s gender is not rare in Japanese workplaces. Not surprisingly, jobs that provide little self-esteem are more likely to be assigned to women. One 42-year-old woman commented on a specific pattern of rotations that only involved women workers in the company.

The thing I hate most about this company is that women are sometimes moved to janitorial jobs or jobs in the company canteen when they become older. When I joined this company, the general affairs office was responsible for hiring those people. I mean, they hired some persons specifically for the canteen jobs. But unfortunately, some are forced to move to the canteen jobs [from other factory jobs]. Rotations between production sites are fine.

Everyone is working hard, so... If they order me to move to janitorial jobs or to the canteen, perhaps I will leave this company.

A majority of employees in this sample expressed their concerns about human relations after moving to a new job. Both men and women had similar worries about inter-personal relationships. In many cases, they resolve the anxiety within a week or two after moving. Sometimes, however, rotations can cause worker relationships to deteriorate, as was the case for one male respondent:

When I moved here from Plant A, I thought I made a big mistake. At that time, three of us came from the same section in Plant A, and fifteen others came from another section there. And we three were, in a sense, ostracized by the rest... We were always saying that we wanted to go back. Indeed, one of us quit, but I and the other one remained here... It was really uncomfortable, you know... Depending on the department and the section, human relations are very different; some places are really bad, I’ve heard. (36-year-old man)

Values of and Rewards from OJT and Rotations

What are the incentives of OJT and job rotations? I raise two fundamental questions: 1) what is it about OJT and job rotations that makes employees view these activities to be important?, and 2) do employees expect tangible rewards for engaging in skill learning activities?

When I asked respondents to assess the value of OJT and rotations, half of the respondents (20 employees) felt that these activities were worthwhile, whereas the other half perceived no value in them. While sixty-five percent of men (13 out of 20 men) felt OJT and rotations were valuable, only 35% of women (7 out of 20 women) felt the same way. The two most frequently mentioned reasons for the perceived worthiness were (1) employees gained confidence in their jobs through OJT and rotations, and (2) OJT and rotations increased variety in their jobs. Related to this second reason, OJT and rotation also provide opportunities
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to experience all the job processes in a production line. Because work is so central in the lives of Japanese employees, gaining knowledge about the place where they spend most of their time may be highly meaningful. Some employees mentioned that actually seeing proficiency in what they do in the job is satisfying. This means, however, that slow learners may be rotated to another job before becoming proficient in their present job. This becomes mal-cyclic once their foremen negatively labels them, because a negative reputation is likely to be passed over to foremen in subsequent jobs.

One 29-year-old male worker suggested that experiencing training/rotation increased the likelihood of inter-firm mobility:

If I know different jobs, the quality of my work will become high even when I decide to leave this company. Then, I can choose a company from a larger pool, and I can pick a variety of job types. And even if I stay here, I can do different things in this company.

Those who perceived no value in OJT and rotations provided reasons such as follows: 1) OJT and rotations increased workload and burdens, 2) their foreman made all the decisions about rotation, 3) OJT and rotations are mandatory, after all. One 26-year old female line worker mentioned:

I would say they are hard, rather than valuable... you know, because my workload increases. To tell the truth, I have to work overtime if I cannot catch up with the output goals. I don’t want to work overtime...

One 38-year-old male machinist questioned the value of any job activities.

If you think it’s fun to learn new things in a job, you might experience a sense of accomplishment in it. But I don’t know if I feel that way... I myself try to separate the worth of my job and the worth of my life. To me, it is difficult to find fulfillment in an activity you repeat every day. To find fulfillment only in your job means that you spend all your time in the company. Then, what happens to your family?

Then, I asked the employees whether they expected any rewards, such as money, promotion, or bonuses, from their OJT and rotations. Sixty-five percent of the total sample (26 employees) did not expect any rewards. Sixty percent of men (12 out of 20) and 70% of women (14 out of 20) did not have any expectations for rewards. When I asked why they did not expect any rewards, a majority of respondents replied that they had never thought of being rewarded for OJT and rotations, for they were just a part of their regular job tasks. Therefore, they appeared to assume that OJT and rotations were remunerated by their salary, not extra rewards. Since OJT and rotations were implemented by the company, they felt they had no choice.

Among those who expected rewards, money was the most desired. Desire for more monetary rewards stem, in part, from one’s understanding of the seniority wage system. A 30-year old male machinist claimed:

Well, I know that my future promotion prospects might be better if my superior has a high opinion of me [from doing well in OJT and rotations], but I dare to take money. I want more pay based on merit... Older people are getting more money even though we are doing exactly the same job. Actually, those who are playing the central role in our workplace are in their 30s, like myself... Money is really an encouragement to me. I’m not saying that the seniority wage is evil, but...

Women who have worked many years for the present employer perceived gender inequality in pay more than those who have had a shorter tenure in the company. Experienced women may desire proper evaluations for what they have achieved, on the same basis as men. A 37-year-old woman with 21 years of experience remarked:

(Emphatically) I do expect rewards. They really do not take women seriously. I don’t think men and women are the same, and I
don’t mind that women’s status is lower than men’s. I simply want them to raise my pay to a certain degree. I want something tangible... I want recognition that even a woman can do this much.

For those to whom money was not the primary importance, trivial things were perceived to be important rewards. One 23-year-old woman mentioned that only employees who make few defective products were allowed to train a new Kohai. She felt that her superior’s trust was an important reward for her hard work. Several young women pointed out that their superior’s words of encouragement were most rewarding:

I feel rewarded when my boss says, “You did a good job.”  (21-year-old woman)

It will be nice if my superior thinks that I’m a good worker.  (22-year-old woman)

A 26-year-old man, who had spent six months on Oh-en in another plant, had thought that he would be assigned some responsibilities after returning from the Oh-en. For him, responsibility was the reward for the efforts he expended in learning new things. He claimed:

First, I thought that they would have planned to give me greater responsibility in my job after I returned from the headquarters plant. But I got nothing... In fact, there was no tangible rewards. Nothing at all. So, I wonder why I had to go anyway ...

Although foremen have some decision-making power over how much bonus raise their subordinates receive, they have no control over their workers’ merit rating or promotions. From the point of view of a foreman, supervising subordinates and assisting worker training are burdensome, stressful tasks with little rewards. A 42-year-old male foreman stated:

I have to talk straight to my subordinates when they make mistakes in their jobs, so I guess they dislike me. When we have an occasion to drink in our group, they pour me beer, but I don’t know what they are saying about me behind my back... Before I came here, I was in technical production. While I was there, I was told, “Since you are getting older, why don’t you go to line production as a foreman?” But there’s no guarantee that you get a pay raise even after you move. A foreman’s job is very stressful and there’s little reward for it. When I was younger, I longed for the title of foreman, but in reality is lots of stress with little benefit... Operators look up at us foremen as a model, and for them to wear a safety cap with a blue line may appear attractive. There is a small amount of allowance for foremen, but that’s not much....

CONCLUSION

The goal of this research was to explore how Japanese manufacturing employees perceive their experiences in job training activities. The results reported here show that generally on-the-job training and job rotations smoothly operate in Japanese organizations, despite the fact that employees receive no substantive remuneration for these work activities. While Japanese employees feel that learning skills is indispensable for their jobs, they seem to consider that it is their duty, rather than choice, to learn skills. Institutional factors embedded in the workplace, such as norms governing interpersonal relations among coworkers, age hierarchy, and gender stratification, appear to be important prerequisites for sustaining the system of skill formation in Japan. These institutional factors seem to exert significant influence on employees’ attitudes towards skill attainment, shaping both their willingness and reluctance towards job training. The results also suggest that OJT and job rotations do not necessarily motivate Japanese employees. Training others is often viewed as burden. With heavy workload, training responsibility tends to interfere with an employee’s regular job tasks. Job rotations discourage employees when they are obliged to move against their will. In many cases, employees express hesitation to move to another job, for it necessarily requires social/transaction
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costs. Yet, once they are ordered to rotate, they feel they have no choice but to move or to leave the job.

One of the striking findings in this research is that the Japanese employees I studied almost unconditionally accepted the way training activities were carried out in their organizations. Although the firms did not provide particular rewards for employees who were experiencing OJT and job rotations, employees never seriously questioned or expressed dissatisfaction about the system of job training itself. One possible reason for this employee acceptance may lie in the absence of formal job description in Japanese firms. Because jobs are never totally individualized or compartmentalized in Japanese firms (cf. Wood, 1989), learning a wide variety of jobs may inevitably become an integral part of an employee's job responsibility. Therefore, employees may feel that they have no choice when it comes to OJT and job rotation, even though they receive no rewards for these activities. This makes an interesting contrast with an American case. In the United States, an employee's job responsibilities are clearly specified in job description, and pay is largely determined by one's skill level and job areas. Therefore, the reward one receives necessarily changes as his or her skills and experiences are upgraded by training.

While there is a growing literature that links skill formation system and organizational structures, more research is needed to understand how structural and institutional forces in workplace interact to affect employee acquisition of job skills. If employees experience work in the web of complex social relations, cues provided by individual perceptions of workplace norms may be a significant element in a conceptual framework of job training. Future research on the formation of employee skills would benefit by integrating quantitative and qualitative information on employee experiences of job training, and by looking more closely at the interplay of formal training structures and institutional constraints on individuals.

REFERENCES


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