

Characteristics of Multicultural Workplaces in Local Companies in Japan

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Abstract

This study examines characteristics of multicultural workplaces in local companies in Japan's rural areas. It focuses on interactions between Japanese supervisors and their foreign workers in these multicultural workplaces. Results of semi-structured interviews conducted in one rural area show that the main language used in the companies is Japanese and that there are few workshops organised by the companies to help workers improve their understanding of different cultures. Through what they have learnt in their interactions with foreign workers, Japanese supervisors of foreign workers try to improve their leadership skills and attempt to make labour relationships comfortable. Results also show that foreign workers, regardless of their nationalities, gain a better understanding of Japanese conventions through their stay in Japan and aim to adapt themselves to their workplaces. Results provide us with some insight into how Japanese supervisors develop intercultural competence in multicultural workplaces and their role played in helping foreign workers adapt to the workplace.

Keywords: multicultural workplaces, local companies, intercultural communication competence

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Introduction

This study is part of our research project to design an educational programme in universities of Japan's rural areas. Due to expanding overseas business and workforce shortages in Japan, local companies in rural areas have begun to employ overseas students who graduate from Japanese universities. After graduation, Japanese students have an increasing number of opportunities to work in multicultural workplaces, even in rural areas. Therefore, we are expected to design an educational programme that enables Japanese students to develop their competence for working in multicultural workplaces in local and rural companies.

To develop this educational programme, we examined characteristics of multicultural workplaces in Japan's rural areas. The purpose of this study is to understand the characteristics of these multicultural workplaces by focusing on the interactions between Japanese supervisors and foreign workers. Previous studies on the interactions between Japanese workers and foreign workers in multicultural workplaces in Japan have revealed that the interactions between these two groups have an influence on both groups. For example, Miyagi and Nakai (2016) conducted interviews with a foreign worker's four former Japanese colleagues in Japan and their results suggested that the Japanese colleagues seemed to change their image of foreign workers through the interactions with one. Shimada and Nakahara (2014) examined how the interactions between Japanese supervisors and their foreign workers in Japanese companies influenced foreign workers' organisational socialisation. They also demonstrated that the type of support and amount of support given by Japanese supervisors played an important role in foreign workers' organisational socialisation.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. In the next section, the research method is explained. In Section 3, the research results are examined. We focus on how Japanese supervisors of foreign workers are affected by their interactions with their subordinates, and how foreign workers are affected by their interactions with their Japanese supervisors. Section 4 discusses implications of the results. Section 5 summarises the study conclusions.

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were conducted at companies in a rural area of Japan. All the company headquarters were based in the area. The area, like some others in Japan, is facing the serious problem of declining population (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2017, July). Study participants included 20 Japanese people and 10 people from foreign countries. Japanese participants included those employed in a personnel department, supervisors of foreign workers and a colleague of a foreign worker. Half of the foreign workers graduated from Japanese universities or graduate schools of Japanese universities. The interviews were conducted between January and April 2018.

Request letters for research were distributed to companies in the area to gain permission for interviews. The request letter explained the purpose of the interviews, types of desired interviewees, the main questions asked at the interview, length of the interview and the plan to protect the study data. All the interviews were recorded with

IC recorders after gaining the interviewees' permission.

Questions to those who worked in a personnel department included outline of the company; company expectations for foreign workers; problems of a multicultural workplace; and how the company copes with these problems. Questions to Japanese supervisors of foreign workers and to a Japanese colleague of a foreign worker included what they try to do as the supervisors/colleague of foreign workers; difficulties they face as the supervisors/colleague of foreign workers; and how they cope with those difficulties. Questions to foreign workers included what they try to do when working with Japanese workers; difficulties they face when working with Japanese workers; and how they cope with these difficulties. Questions following up on interviewees' comments were also asked during the interviews.

In some companies, the same Japanese senior member of a company played the role of both a personnel department employee and a supervisor of foreign workers. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes.

Results

This section examines the results obtained from the interviews and focuses on the interactions between Japanese supervisors and foreign workers in multicultural workplaces. First, we focus on how Japanese supervisors of foreign workers are affected by their interactions with foreign workers. Then we focus on how foreign workers are affected by their interactions with Japanese supervisors.

How Japanese supervisors of foreign workers are affected by their interactions with foreign workers

The main language used in the companies is Japanese. There are few workshops organised by the companies to help their workers gain a better understanding of different cultures. In these circumstances, Japanese supervisors of foreign workers try to improve their leadership skills and attempt to make labour relationships comfortable through what they have learnt in their interactions with foreign workers. Table 1 describes difficulties that Japanese supervisors have experienced in multicultural workplaces.

Table 1

Difficulties that Japanese supervisors have experienced

Examples of difficulties	Cause of difficulties
• Foreign workers did not understand what was said in Japanese.	Level of foreign workers' linguistic competence
• Foreign workers did not understand technical terms in Japanese.	Foreign workers' lack of knowledge of working field
• Foreign workers did not know Japanese business manners.	Foreign workers' lack of understanding of Japanese business conventions
• Foreign worker was not accustomed to Japanese table manners.	Foreign workers' lack of understanding of Japanese surface culture
• Foreign workers were not punctual.	Foreign workers' lack of understanding of Japanese deep culture
• Although foreign workers did not understand what was said, they told that they understood it.	Foreign workers' hesitation in saying their lack of understanding

As Table 1 shows, the difficulties for supervisors are caused by a variety of factors. For example, the first row in Table 1 illustrates that there are sometimes difficulties caused by their foreign workers' low linguistic competence. (Here linguistic competence means the knowledge about vocabulary and grammar of a language.) The third row in Table 1 illustrates that another difficulty is caused by foreign workers' lack of understanding of Japanese business conventions.

In addition to the difficulties illustrated in Table 1, combinations of reasons might cause the difficulties described by Japanese supervisors. For example, some supervisors thought that their foreign workers understood what was said in Japanese, but later they learned the foreign workers had not actually understood. This is an example of miscommunication that can be caused by multiple reasons including foreign workers' low linguistic competence, foreign workers' lack of understanding of Japanese deep culture (i.e. Japanese communication style), and Japanese supervisors' lack of understanding of cultural differences in communication styles.

How do Japanese supervisors try to overcome these difficulties to make labour relationships comfortable? Table 2 below describes the strategies employed by supervisors.

Table 2
What Japanese supervisors do to overcome difficulties

What supervisors do	Examples
Consideration for foreign workers' linguistic competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Speaking slowly •Speaking with simple words •Using English •Giving opportunities for foreign workers to talk with Japanese colleagues in Japanese as many as possible
Consideration for cultural differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Consideration for differences in communication styles •Consideration for differences in customs
Advice and encouragement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Teaching what to do when foreign workers have difficulties in their works •Encouraging foreign workers when they have difficulties •Listening to foreign workers' problems
Asking foreign workers about their cultures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Trying to expand knowledge of foreign worker's own language

Consideration of foreign workers' linguistic competence was most frequently highlighted by supervisors. This is understandable, given that foreign workers' low linguistic competence causes variety of difficulties for Japanese supervisors.

Consideration for cultural differences is divided into two types, namely consideration for differences in communication styles and consideration for differences in customs. Regarding the consideration for differences in communication styles, some supervisors will avoid using the high-context communication style that they would normally use when talking to Japanese colleagues. As for consideration for differences in customs, one supervisor gave the following example: Japanese workers keep workplaces clean and tidy but the supervisor could not ask his foreign workers to do the same cleaning tasks because the foreign workers do not have this custom of cleaning by themselves in their home country.

Experiences working with foreign workers influence the attitudes and skills of Japanese supervisors. Japanese supervisors make efforts to shift their attitudes due to similarities and differences between cultures and also develop skills to communicate effectively with foreign workers, as evident in Table 3.

Table 3

Where influence of intercultural interaction on Japanese supervisors is seen

Where	Examples
Attitudes towards other cultures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coming to recognise that his foreign worker is glad, angry, sad or happy in the same manner as Japanese people • Coming to recognise that it is important to think that his foreign worker is similar to Japanese colleagues except for his Japanese proficiency level • Emphasising it important for Japanese people to understand other cultures
Skills for effective communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finding communication strategies effective for his interaction with his foreign worker, and trying using the strategies in his interaction • Listening to his foreign worker carefully to understand him better and making the working environment comfortable • Doing his best to avoid using the high-context communication style in multicultural workplaces

The dynamic movement in the level of Japanese supervisors' attitudes towards other cultures is categorised into two types. One type is to emphasise cultural similarities rather than cultural differences. The first two examples in 'Attitudes towards other cultures' in Table 3 fall into this type. The other type is to emphasise the importance of understanding cultural differences. The third example in 'Attitudes towards other cultures' in Table 3 falls into this type. Japanese supervisors also develop and use effective communication skills (see the examples in 'Skills for effective communication' in Table 3).

How foreign workers are affected by their interactions with Japanese supervisors

Foreign workers, regardless of their nationalities, gain a better understanding of Japanese conventions through their stay in Japan. This is particularly true if foreign workers have worked after graduating from Japanese universities. Table 4 presents some comments given by Japanese supervisors.

Table 4

Japanese supervisors' impressions of their foreign workers' understanding of Japanese conventions

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foreign workers understand Japanese communication style since they have lived in Japan for several years. • One supervisor has few difficulties working as a supervisor since his foreign worker has lived in Japan for nearly ten years and has a better understanding of Japanese conventions. • Foreign workers have been in Japan for several years, are interested in Japanese animations, and are familiar with Japanese conventions.

All the foreign workers who participated in the study have experienced some difficulties whether or not they understand Japanese conventions (see Table 5). It is of interest that Japanese supervisors and foreign workers do not always regard the same issues as difficulties. For example, both Japanese supervisors and foreign workers regarded foreign workers' not understanding what was said in Japanese as a difficulty (see Tables 1 and 5). This is because foreign workers' understanding is essential for carrying out work tasks properly. If foreign workers cannot understand what is said in Japanese, then problems may occur for both Japanese supervisors and foreign workers. On the other hand, foreign workers regarded appropriate use of Japanese honorific forms as a difficulty, but Japanese supervisors did not. This is probably because proper use of honorific forms likely does not change the content of what the foreign worker said. Thus, Japanese supervisors may not regard foreign workers' inappropriate use of Japanese honorific forms as a difficulty in multicultural workplaces. However, in general, we are expected to use language appropriately according to the social context or person we speak to. So, if we do not use Japanese honorific forms appropriately, then we might be regarded as being rude and/or impolite. That is why foreign workers try to use Japanese honorific forms appropriately.

Table 5
Difficulties that foreign workers have experienced

Examples of difficulties	Cause of difficulties
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foreign workers could not understand what was said in Japanese. • Foreign worker felt tired from business meetings in Japanese that last long. 	Level of foreign workers' linguistic competence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was difficult to use Japanese honorific forms appropriately. 	Level of foreign worker's sociolinguistic competence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foreign workers did not understand technical terms in Japanese. • Foreign worker was confused because of the lack of knowledge of working field. 	Foreign workers' lack of knowledge of working field
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It took time to be accustomed to workplaces in Japan. • Foreign worker did not know customs related to business drinking parties, e.g. where to sit at business drinking parties. 	Foreign workers' lack of understanding of Japanese business conventions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heavy snow in winter made the daily life in the area inconvenient. 	Weather in the area

With these difficulties, what do foreign workers do to adapt themselves to their workplaces? We identified four key ways that foreign workers adapt to their workplaces. They are presented in Table 6.

Table 6
Key elements in foreign workers' adaptation to their workplaces

Elements	Examples
Asking Japanese people working together when having questions/problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Foreign workers ask their colleagues whenever they have problems. •Foreign workers ask their colleagues without hesitation.
Viewing characteristics of Japanese people and conventions of Japanese business in a positive way	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •It takes time to achieve the goals in Japanese companies because various issues have to be checked before launching their projects. •Japanese people have high sense of responsibility for their work.
Finding positive aspects of living in the area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Being satisfied with living environment in the area •This area provides foreign worker with jobs which he is interested in.
Building good relationships with Japanese people working together	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •It is important to go for a drink with Japanese colleagues to get to know each other better.

The most common way that foreign workers cope with their difficulties is to ask their Japanese co-workers for help. This means that Japanese people working with foreign workers play important roles in foreign workers' adaptation to their workplaces, and that building good relationships that enable foreign workers to ask Japanese people for help without hesitation is crucial in adaptation to the workplace. We will return to this point later.

Discussion

In this section, we discuss the implications of the results. First, we discuss Japanese supervisors' intercultural competence, which is developed through interactions with foreign workers. Then, we discuss the role that Japanese supervisors play in foreign workers' adaptation to their workplaces. Finally, we briefly discuss how to increase the number of foreign workers living and working in the rural area.

Development of Japanese supervisors' intercultural competence

To measure the progress of Japanese supervisors' intercultural competence in multicultural workplaces, we use the 'Intercultural Development Continuum' (Hammer 2012). The Intercultural Development Continuum is 'a theoretical framework that ranges from the more monocultural mindsets of Denial and Polarization through the transitional orientation of Minimization to the intercultural or

global mindsets of Acceptance and Adaptation' (Hammer 2012: 118). Each stage depicts different attitudes and behaviours towards cultural differences. Individuals in the stage of Denial often do not recognise cultural differences. Individuals in the stage of Polarization recognise the existence of cultural differences and think about 'cultural differences from an "us versus them" perspective' (Hammer 2012: 121). According to Hammer (2012: 121), 'Polarization can take the form of Defense ("My cultural practices are superior to other cultural practices") or Reversal ("Other cultures are better than mine").' Minimization is a transitional stage. In this stage of development, identifying cultural commonality is highlighted. Appreciation of cultural differences occurs at the stage of Acceptance. For individuals in this stage, 'diversity feels "understood."' (Hammer 2012: 123) Finally, Adaptation is the stage in which individuals are 'capable of shifting cultural perspective and changing behavior in culturally appropriate and authentic ways' (Hammer 2012: 124). For those who are in this stage, 'intercultural competence means adaptation in performance' and 'diversity feels "valued and involved."' (Hammer 2012: 124)

As Table 3 in the previous section indicates, Japanese supervisors' attitudes and communication practices are influenced by multicultural workplaces. The Japanese supervisors display two types of attitudes. One type is to emphasise cultural similarities rather than cultural differences, and the other is to emphasise the importance of understanding other cultures. The former type is regarded as being in the stage of Minimization and the latter type is regarded as being in the stage of Acceptance. Regarding skills for effective communication, Japanese supervisors think of what is effective in their intercultural interactions, find effective strategies for intercultural interactions through trial and error, and use these strategies in their daily interactions. This means that they are in the stage of Adaptation.

In our data, the Japanese supervisors' developmental stage of their attitudes towards cultural difference is different from that of their skills for effective communication. This implies two possibilities. One possibility is that developing skills for effective communication might be more urgent for Japanese supervisors than shifting attitudes towards cultural differences. Communication is essential for carrying out work tasks. The other possibility is that developing skills for effective communication might be less difficult than shifting attitudes towards cultural differences.

Japanese supervisors' role in foreign workers' adaptation to their workplaces

As Table 6 in the previous section shows, foreign workers ask Japanese people for help with their difficulties. This means that building relationships that enable foreign workers to ask Japanese people for help without hesitation is crucial for foreign workers' adaptation to their workplaces. How can such relationships be built?

Shimada and Nakahara's quantitative study (2014) demonstrates that the type of support and amount of support provided by Japanese supervisors play an important role in foreign workers' organisational socialisation. In our study it was predicted that Japanese supervisors' support must be important in building good relationships. Let us look at the results again. As Table 2 in the previous section shows, Japanese supervisors support foreign workers in various ways. For example, Japanese supervisors give advice to foreign workers when they have difficulties in carrying out work. This falls under what Shimada and Nakahara (2014) call business support. In

addition, Japanese supervisors encourage foreign workers when the foreign workers have difficulties regarding not only their work but also their daily life.¹ This is an example that falls under what Shimada and Nakahara (2014) call mental support. Some foreign workers' comments make it clear that Japanese supervisors' encouragement helped to build good relationships. Moreover, Japanese supervisors ask foreign workers about their cultures and expand their knowledge about the foreign workers' cultures. This falls under what Shimada and Nakahara (2014) call cultural support. It seems that supervisors' various support as well as foreign workers' efforts plays important roles in building relationships.

Importance of making the rural area attractive

As Table 6 in the previous section shows, finding positive aspects of living in the area is one of the key elements in foreign workers' adaptation to their workplaces. One positive aspect that participants pointed out is the living environment. For example, people in the area can have a short commute to work from home either by car or by train. Usually traffic is not heavy and trains are not crowded when compared to the Tokyo metropolitan area. In the Tokyo metropolitan area, many people have a long commute to work and take very crowded trains. It is important to find other ways to make the rural area attractive to increase the number of foreign workers living and working there.

What should we do to make the rural area more attractive? Based on the comments from foreign workers, we suggest two things. First, we should advertise the area to more people. One foreign worker commented that his friends had not even known where the area was until the foreign worker moved there. Second, Japanese people in the area should have more opportunities to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds and develop their intercultural communication competence. One foreign worker commented that Japanese people in the area are not accustomed to interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds, and that the foreign worker is often asked the same questions by people he meets, such as why he lives in Japan and where he is from.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand characteristics of multicultural workplaces in rurally-located, local companies in Japan by focusing on the interactions between Japanese supervisors and their foreign workers. The results gained from semi-structured interviews conducted in local companies of one rural area provide us with some insight into how Japanese supervisors' intercultural competence is developed through experiences working with foreign workers and the role that supervisors play in foreign workers' adaptation to their workplaces. Furthermore, the results suggest that it is important to make the rural area attractive to increase the number of foreign workers living and working there.

The significance of this study is to have investigated multicultural workplaces in rurally-located, local companies and to have demonstrated how intercultural interactions affect both Japanese supervisors and their foreign workers. As our previous study shows, Japanese students, who are expected to work in rurally-located, local companies after graduation, have surprisingly 'little experience interacting with

people from different countries' (Yamada et al. 2018: 178). How can we create more opportunities for Japanese students to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds and find strategies for effective intercultural interactions? What kinds of in-class and out-of-class activities will help students develop their intercultural communication competence? These questions need to be addressed through further research.

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Footnote

1. Moriya (2017) suggests that the distance between employers and employees is close in medium and small-sized companies in Japan and that by helping their foreign workers solve problems caused by cultural differences, the employers foster their good relationships with their employees and promote their foreign workers' adaptation to their workplaces. Moriya's (2017) suggestion reinforces our view that encouraging foreign workers when the foreign workers have difficulties regarding their work and/or their daily life is important in building good relationships.

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