

An Outside Perspective: Views from a non-Japanese HR professional and an intercultural communication consultant

~ What it takes for Japanese to succeed on the global business stage ~

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Whether or not a Japanese employee will succeed in an overseas posting cannot be determined simply by looking at his or her skills, attitude or language abilities. To some degree, of course, all of these factors come into play, but having the proper “awareness” is also an essential component in achieving a successful outcome.



What does “global” mean to you?

Andy: I think we focus too much on nationality when we mean “global.” For me, a “global person” is someone who can work with people who have different ideas and different ways of thinking, or, to use the Japanese word, a different *joushiki* (a common or shared understanding within a particular cultural group) about how business should be done. Of course, working overseas is part of that, but it's also working in Japan, and sometimes it can be working with other Japanese people.

Silvia: To be “global” means the ability to guarantee the same quality of outcome no matter where you find yourself. When you're in your own country, your comfort zone, you set a certain standard. The challenge is to maintain that same standard even under different conditions and with different people. The second word I would like to add is “switch.” We don't need the same competencies and the same skills every day, so developing the ability to switch your attitude, behavior and competencies according to the context is the key global attitude that can make a difference in global business.

What is the ideal candidate for an overseas position? Should the emphasis be placed on skills, or attitude, or both?

Andy: First of all, it's important to keep in mind that skills should not be the only reason for overseas selection. Even though someone may be very good at their job in their home market, it doesn't necessarily mean that that person will be as good at the same job in a new environment. In addition, there is often a lack of awareness on the part of the people who are transferred overseas. While they may think of themselves as being very effective, due to their unfamiliarity with the new environment in which they are working, they may actually be causing problems for the local staff. Hence, being able to

select people who are aware of this gap in perception and can, as Silvia said, “switch,” or adjust, to the new environment is a big part of it.



Silvia: I think the match between “skills” and “attitude” changes according to the type of overseas assignment. If the main purpose of the foreign assignment is development of personnel in terms of immersing them in a global context and helping them to establish a network, then attitude is probably more important than skills. However, it is a different story if, for example, we send a senior professional abroad to produce a certain business result. Then the focus is on performance, so skills would be the main success factor. Yet even in this case, attitude is definitely very important. All in all, the point is that there is no single ideal profile; you have to understand what the company's purpose is and be able to find the most suitable candidate for that particular assignment.

How important is language in succeeding in a global workplace?

Andy: I think it's hard to avoid language because you need some level of skill if you're communicating with people who don't speak your language. However, what's more important than the language ability is the willingness to use it. Also, having sufficient language ability does not necessarily mean that you'll succeed in the new country as there are other critical points. Therefore, I think you can't avoid language, but at the same time it isn't the most important thing.

Silvia: As for the importance of language skills, I think speaking the language can make a difference in terms of comfort. If you know the local language, or English, in a global environment, your life is much easier because you can interact, express your ideas, show your skills, and express your professionalism in a much easier way. Yet I don't believe that language is the focus as it should come after other things, like preparation in understanding the global environment and its dynamics, preparation in being flexible in a new environment, and the ability to “switch” one's attitude accordingly.

There're data that show certain countries have exceptional English language skills but are very poor communicators while there are other countries in which actual English capabilities are quite low but they are very effective communicators. Why do you think this is so?



Andy: I think the right mindset and approach to communication has a huge impact on people's ability to be understood. If people understand what you mean and get your message successfully, that is communication. You don't need to get a high score on TOEFL or TOEIC to be a good communicator. These test scores indicate where your level might be but they don't say anything about your willingness to use that language and how you approach communication, which I believe are equally, if not more, important than your language ability.

Silvia: I would like to add one note to HR professionals here. When we provide language education to our employees, we focus on finding the best language schools for them. Any employee could go and find their own language school, but what we offer as HR professionals should be a strategic language training that makes a difference in that person's career development, not a language education based only on the knowledge of grammar.

What can companies do to prepare Japanese employees to perform well in a multi-cultural environment?

Silvia: As for the JT group, when we started sending people abroad we focused a lot on language preparation. Having learned from these errors, we are now developing a renewed pre-departure program to cover all their needs. Selection of people with the right mindset and motivation to go is an important part of it. We're also trying to decide on the candidates that will go abroad at least one year beforehand so that we have enough time to observe who will be ready to go within a year and who will need more time. In terms of preparation, the core areas we cover are mindset, technical skills required by the position, language skills, and competencies. Competencies include, for example, communication skills, relationship abilities, the ability to understand others, and strategic thinking skills.

Andy: I think there are three key points that need to be addressed. First, as Silvia said, is identifying people with the right motivation to be sent abroad. I feel people who are successful overseas tend to be open to new experiences and interested in meeting new people, often people that are different from themselves, and in building relationships. Second, before the departure, you need to look at how you can support people as individuals, which is going to be difficult and time-consuming for HR people. And last but not least, supporting them not only before, but also after the foreign assignment is important as they can experience reverse culture shock upon return after having been out of the country for a long time.



Silvia: It seems to me that many Japanese companies try to create standard programs for people headed overseas depending on seniority and experience within the company. However, I believe that HR needs to view them on an individual basis; we cannot provide standard programs. When we are preparing people for a foreign assignment, we should remember that we are not preparing them to perform in the country they are going to, but for something they do not know. Therefore, we need to provide each candidate with individualized preparation that will help them to build on their personal skills.

Final Comments

Silvia: To conclude, if it's your responsibility to prepare people who will be going abroad, here are some tips that you could make use of. Above all, remember that sending people abroad is not an administrative job. Of course, we have to manage the administration aspects, such as visa permits, etc., but this is something that any non-HR person could do. If you want to make a difference, start thinking strategically. Firstly, clarify the reason why you are sending your employees abroad, and what you want them to achieve by the time they come back to Japan, which are things that HR usually doesn't consider much. A foreign assignment doesn't finish when the employee comes back to Japan. The assignment also includes integrating the employee's overseas experience in his or her home environment. As HR professionals, we need to take care of this as well. So what you can do tomorrow is try to see the big picture; every element, from the selection of the candidates to what you can do when they come back. Meanwhile, you need to assess your performance to see if you are doing well in each step along the way. If there is any part you need to improve, you should prove your skills as an HR professional and look for better solutions.

Andy: Looking at it from an individual perspective, when we say “global business person,” our immediate image is somebody who lived abroad for a long time and can speak many foreign languages. In fact, it is not like you are global or

not global. Everybody has different sets of skills and abilities and things they are good at. Having that image of what you are good at and thinking of how you could reduce your fears, is a practical thing you can start thinking about. May your fear be language, food, or sitting on an airplane and suddenly somebody randomly starts speaking to you, whatever scares you, just approach that fear and challenge yourself. That is a thing that you can do to develop yourself starting right now.