

A Heuristic Model - The Case of Challenges Facing Western Business People in Japan

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Abstract

This paper is based on an investigation which has utilised the data collected from eleven different case studies. Each case study deals with issues and challenges facing the western expatriates residing in Japan for the purposes of business or education. The case studies were analysed separately and then the commonalities in issues were identified. These challenges were grouped in five different categories of Language, Culture, Work Ethics, Transportation and Red tape. Various scenarios relating to each group were provided and discussed. A heuristics model to measure an index value for the challenges facing the expatriates was explained and presented. This model can be utilised for the purposes of monitoring one's difficulty levels in a manner which allows performing what-if analysis or comparison with other similar scenarios.

The findings indicate that an attempt to familiarise oneself with the basics of the Japanese language and recognition and acceptance of certain attitude differences would certainly contribute to a successful adaption.

Key words: Networking, Culture, Language, Education

Introduction

As suggested by Shamoan (2010), an increasing interest has recently been shown by the students in the American universities in enrolling in Japanese courses as, majors and minors. Although this interest is primarily driven by the popular Japanese culture such as Manga, anime (animated films and shows) and video games, it has been encouraging students to study more serious aspects of the Japanese culture and language.

The main objective of this paper is to identify and present effective means of adopting suitable approaches and adjusting attitudes for the purpose of work or education in Japan. The investigation is based on eleven different case studies chosen from a large database of interviews in various countries and settings. The selected interviews for the analysis were the most appropriate cases. These cases are detailed and structured interviews with professionals, mainly, from a Canadian background who were residing and working in Japan.

These professionals have had experience in various fields as presidents, directors, consultants, teachers or business owners. Many have also gone through the process of studying the language. Hence, their experiential knowledge about the challenges and how to effectively overcome the issues are quite valuable. The interviews are extracted from the Acadia Multi-media Case Management System (AMCMS). The entire system comprises 340 case interviews related to various fields in several countries.

A number of research articles that inform this study are reviewed and the methodology used to collect, analyse the data sample is outlined. A series of predictions are then presented based on insight from the articles and the video interviews. The paper proposes a heuristic model for the purposes of predicting the Challenge Index for a prospective westerner wishing to work and reside in Japan.

Notable Literature

Differences between national cultures is a topic of interest to many. Popular among researchers are models that seek to explain and describe these differences. Two frameworks in particular inform this study. One of these was created by Dutch researcher Geert Hofstede and published in numerous studies over time (Hofstede, 1980, Hofstede, 1993). He classified countries based on the survey data collected in early 1970s' from over 100,000 IBM employees located in 72 countries. Initially 40 countries were classified. Further analysis of the data allowed three regions and ten other countries to be classified according to four dimensions of culture that he labeled uncertainty avoidance, masculinity, power distance and individualism. Research conducted a few years later uncovered a fifth dimension that was termed long term orientation. This last dimension refers the acceptance by a culture of a long term and traditional view of time. Tolerance for ambiguity refers to the uncertainty avoidance dimension. The extent to which stereotypical male and female characteristics are found in a culture was capture by the masculinity dimension. The degree to which inequality is accepted in a society was termed power distance. Finally, whether the interests of the individual or the group take precedence is referred to as individualism.

Originating with the ideas of sociologist, Talcott Parsons, a fellow Dutchman Franz Trompenaars (1994) used survey data from 28 countries to categorize national cultures according to five bipolar dimensions. He used questions that posed different dilemmas of everyday life. Achievement as opposed to ascription refers to whether status is given or whether we need to prove ourselves. Specific as opposed to diffuse refers to whether we handle ourselves in predetermined ways or whether our relationships are contextual and changing. Neutral versus emotional refers to whether individuals display or hide emotions. Universalism as the opposite of particularism is concerned with whether rules or relationships take precedence. Finally, similar to Hofstede's model, individualism versus collectivism explores whether the needs of the individual or the group is dominant in a society.

These two models or frameworks of national culture differences are well known and have been popularised in many management textbooks. They also prove useful for explaining some of the experiences of the Canadian expatriates in Japan.

Data Collection and Discussion

The research site of this study is Japan. Opportunistic search was used to identify interview candidates. The researcher sought out Canadian expatriates living in the Tokyo area through personal contacts and the Canadian Chamber of Commerce in Japan. Prospective interviewees were contacted two months prior to the interview by e-mail to obtain their consent, arrange an interview date and location and pass on the survey instruction. In June of 2007 the researcher travelled to Japan with a videographer. Over a one week period of time, video interviews were conducted at the offices of 11 managers. Only two of the individuals contacted were not able to participate. Interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes. Typically 20 minutes were needed to set up equipment and 20 minutes were needed to take down the film set and depart. Interviewees were filmed from the chest up. The interviewer is not seen or heard in the interview.

Companies or organisations sampled in this study included those associated with mining, higher education, language school, technology training, educational event management, investments, multinational technology company, a chamber of commerce, automotive manufacturer, management consultant and news reporting. Four organisations were large with global operations and while the remainder would be characterized as SMEs. In total 4 of the organizations were headquartered outside of Japan if one includes the Canadian Chamber of Commerce among that set. Three of the interviewees were female and eight were male. Six of the interviewees were business owners.

The video interviews are hosted on the Acadia Multimedia Case Management System (AMCMS). This system is a web-based, password protected, scalable platform designed for higher education business students and the corporate training market.

Although Japan is regarded as one of the main democracies of the world, one must remember that it is a society in which people are ranked according to their social status or position at work. Hence, a totally different kind of relationships between people should be expected. As pointed out by Hofstede (1980), The fact that not all individuals in societies are equal expresses the attitude of the culture towards these inequalities amongst us. Hofstede (1993) also suggests that Japan is a hierarchical society. The hierarchical feature of the Japanese society does not imply inequity. Japan is a free country with its strong beliefs in their traditions and religions of mainly Buddhism and Shintoism. With regard to their traditional beliefs, one may refer to the Bushido concept which contains egalitarian principles that have allowed wealth to trickle down to the vast majority in Japanese society (Fujimura, 2011). The traditional religions have also had similar effects on the Japanese attitude in terms of equity and equality of human beings in their society. According to Taka et al (1994), "In the case of Buddhism, every living creature is said to have an equal Buddha-hood, a Buddhahood which is very similar with the idea of numen and micro-cosm."

Respect for others, in particular, people who are older or have a higher status in the society or the organisation is definitely observed in Japan. Respecting the superiors is extremely important. For instance, the person in charge in Japan would practically decide how the subordinates should behave or even appear in their presence. Unlike the western societies, the superior can even charge the subordinates with various tasks outside the written duties of the position. One must remember that this kind of general attitude should not be perceived in a negative manner as it certainly functions well and effectively for Japan. Perhaps, some of the other societies may start learning how to re-introduce this important attitude which is unfortunately being gradually phased out. One must accept the fact that unlike Australia and Canada, Japan is not regarded as a universalist, rule based society but it is classed as a particularist society. For further reading refer to Trompenaars (1994).

It should be noted that often language and culture are interrelated as one influences the other. Culture's roots are deeply established in the years of tradition and history.

Insight from the interviews suggested that a lack of knowledge of the Japanese language can create a solitary situation for the Westerner who is trying to become part of the society. A former executive of a multinational information technology put it as follows.

“Most people coming to Tokyo nowadays particularly on an expat assignment have difficulty finding the survival skills needed to really learn Japanese and I think maybe that's the most difficult thing. You get to a stage where you have little bits and pieces but you can't really have a conversation with anyone so you either kind of get siloed into the foreign community and you don't really interface with the Japanese community or some people do make a little effort but for people here on shorter term very often they live on a little microcosm of the world in Japan.”

Hence, an attempt to learn the basics of the language and using it in every opportunity would allow the person to progress and ultimately hold basic conversation with the locals. This approach will contribute to creation of better links and relationships with the Japanese people.

Although the writing system can be quite overwhelming, specially, with its different types of (Kanji, Hiragana and Katakana), the Japanese languages was a spoken language long before it had any writing (Gilhooly, 2010). Hence, acquiring some basic conversational skills in Japanese should not pose a great challenge for a western person. Especially, in the case of a person from the English speaking background, the learning process in terms of speed and enjoyment should be reasonably high. Firstly, the Japanese language does not have many hard-to-pronounce or very specific phonemes as in the Romance and other Indo-European languages. One can very easily imitate the basic sounds used in Japanese. Secondly, the Japanese grammar is straight forward and very logical. Unlike a Latin based language such as French, or even a Germanic language such as German, Japanese has rather a simple way of conjugation.

It should be noted that every aspect of life in Japan is different from the cultures closely associated with the English speaking societies. Fully understanding and appreciating the Japanese language and culture can be rather challenging. Accepting the differences and adapting attitudes to suit the Japanese environment are essential in overcoming the obstacles.

It is important to adapt the western attitudes and try to adopt some Japanese attitudes or at least, recognise certain situations such as exchanging business cards. The Japanese would receive the cards with a great deal of respect and they examine the business card in the presence of the card owner very carefully before they put it in their pocket. They never, fold it or scribble notes on other people's cards. That kind of behaviour can be regarded as impolite and not acceptable. These examples should be taken into consideration.

Even the language has been influenced by the Japanese culture and probably vice versa.. For instance, when a Japanese person at a lower position wants to address someone who has a higher ranking, they always use a special honorific title. This is not necessarily "San" (Mr/Mrs) after the surname but in many cases they utilise the term "Sensei". This title has a very specific connotation. It refers to a person who has, through years of experience, gained certain skills which places them above the rest.

Combining the work ethics of the Japanese with those of the western countries such as Canada, US, Australia or some European countries, will create a very desirable situation. The Japanese are committed to hard work, attention to details and responsibility. The Western people such as the British, North Americans, Australians and most Europeans have the sense of business development and creativity.

According to Jaivisam (2010), "Asian cultures are categorized to be the high-context culture. Opposite to low-context culture, the nonverbal messages are much more important and being used than the verbal communication in high-culture context." The Japanese, generally, utilise the body language frequently and in a slightly different manner. For instance, a Japanese person would, very seldom, provide a negative response to a question. Often, a passive gesture with a readable reluctance in the facial expression would signal the unwillingness.

Most Japanese businesses are very keen on connecting and networking with the western countries. Hence, they would be willing to adopt some western attitudes. The Japanese education systems are also introducing western ideas into their formal curricula. For instance, as mentioned by Maruyama and Ueno (2010), "Ethics education for professionals has become popular in Japan over the last two decades. Many professional schools, especially those of engineering and of nursing, require students to take an applied ethics or professional ethics course these days." Therefore, there is a clear evidence that the Japanese intend to adopt the desirable western attitudes, in this case ethics, even into the education system.

One should, however, remember that some western attitudes and practices are acceptable and reserved, temporarily, only for the western visitors. They are not adopted by the people who are Japanese or possibly live there permanently. For instance, it is acceptable for a western visitor refer to a director by his/her first name but that style is not accepted by the

people who work under that person on a non-temporary basis. These kinds of subtleties are quite challenging and interesting at the same time.

The Japanese spend much longer hours at work. They spend over 10 hours at work and often get home after 8 pm. That does not necessarily mean that they are actually working or producing. After all, as stated by Tanaka et al (2011), all Japanese laws clearly state working hours rather comparable to the western world:

“The Japan’s Labor Standards Law defines working hours at eight hours per day and 40 hours per week. If overtime is deemed necessary, in accordance with Article 36 of the Law, there must be negotiation and agreement between the representatives of management and labour, and the agreement must be reported to the Labor Standards Inspection Office, Tanak et al, 2011).

Hence, an appearance of being at work is, probably, more important than actually performing tasks during those long hours. The expatriates should familiarise themselves with this attitude, accept and try to adhere to it. Very often, the Japanese employees go out together after work. The work colleagues socialise outside the office and eat something before their long trip home.

The Japanese, in general, spend long times to commute to work. In many instances over one hour of time is spent on a crowded train. The experiences of a mining company executive are quite typical.

“My day starts normally at about 6:00 a.m. in the morning, when I wake up. I leave the house at perhaps 7:00 a.m., I then have an hour and half train ride and/or walk to the office so I arrive at 8:30 a.m., I usually work until 5:30 p.m.”

During the commuting time, most Japanese commuters, if possible, either tap and click on their smart phones or read books. Although the trains/buses are rather crowded, the passengers are always very orderly. So, the time spent on the public transport is not an unpleasant time. The Japanese rely heavily on different means of public transportation. One should remember that the bicycles are extremely popular in Japan as another mode of transport. They are ridden usually on the sidewalks amongst the pedestrians. So, the western pedestrian must remember that a bicycle may ride past them at any time. The Japanese even ride their bicycles when it rains. They usually carry an umbrella or attach it to the handlebar.

Going to Japan with the idea of finding a consistent and totally modern society should not be the expectation. One might even come across apartments with paper walls and kerosene heaters as suggested by an interviewee.

Many western societies, in the recent years, have realised that the hierarchical and vertical style of management does not help achievement and productivity. They have, in many cases, opted for the matrix style in which the lines of responsibility go up, down and across the

organisation. The Western expatriate should remember that this style is not very commonly practised in Japan. It should be noted that having some form of red tape is not specific to Japan. Many other societies have and practise some forms of beaurocratic procedures.

Based on the above discussions, a heuristic model for predicting the Challenge Index for settling in Japan is proposed.

A Heuristic Model

The data analysis and evaluation of the selected cases noted above led to the identification of a set of issues, themes and topics which in turn were grouped into a set of common challenges. The groups covered challenges such as learning basic conversational Japanese, attitudes of the Japanese people both at work and in social situations, commonly practised ways of handling long hours spent at work and on public transportation, and differences in dealing with formal situation. These challenges were then titled as Language, Culture, Transportation, Work Ethics and Red Tape. The cases were observed carefully again and the issues raised were recorded under each category.

For the purposes of this paper, the possible problems or challenges have been classified under five main categories. The rationale for this grouping is based on the frequency of issue topics mentioned in the interviews. The following is the main topics raised and discussed by the interviewees.

- 1). Language
- 2). Culture
- 3). Work Ethics
- 4). Transportation
- 5). Red Tape

It should be noted that the emphasis placed on each category and the frequency of its occurrence in the interviews was noted during the observation. As a result, the categories for the issues were ranked according to their importance. Language has the highest weighting and the Red Tape issue ranks number five.

If we allocate weighting values of 5 to 1 to these categories, Language will receive 5, Culture 4, Work Ethics 3, Transportation 2 and finally Red Tape 1. Now we may utilise these categories as factors contributing to what we have referred to as the “Challenge Index”. In other words, these factors can be regarded as independent variables of our heuristic model and the Challenge Index will depend on these variables:

$$CI = \text{Function of } \{ L, C, WE, T, RT \}$$

Where:

L = Language

C = Culture

WE = Work Ethics
T = Transportation
RT = Red Tape

In which, the independent variables in the model are assumed to have an additive effect on each other.

Therefore, a prospective expatriate by inserting values in the model may approximate a Challenge Index for their experience in Japan. This process can be completed by substituting zero (0 being the smallest value of effect) for absence of the factors (independent variables), or approximate percentages for the strength of the existing factors for each category. These percentages can then be multiplied by the factor rankings of (5,4,3,2 or 1). Finally all the products (up to 5) can be added up to determine a figure as a guide for the challenge Index.

Mathematically, the Challenge Index ranges between 0 (5 X 0% + 4 X 0% + 3 X 0% + 2 X 0% + 1 X 0%) and 15 (5 X 100% + 4 X 100% + 3 X 100% + 2 X 100% + 1 X 100%). Practically, however, the index value should be a figure greater than zero and less than 15 as zero or one-hundred percent difficulty levels for any category would not be realistic. A nominated figure, based on the initial testing with people who have had the experience of living and working in Japan, suggests the range 2 to 12. If we take the mid-point of this range, then we will have the figure 7. Therefore, we may regard the band consisting of 6,7 or 8 as a reasonable threshold for the difficulty level. That means, a Challenge Index of 12 causes more difficulty compared to a Challenge Index of 5 or 4. It must be emphasized that this approach should be treated as a heuristic (close enough) rather than an optimisation (exact) model.

Let us consider an example based on a real situation of one of the interviewees:

L = 0.4 - 0.4 means that the user of the model perceives her difficulty level with the language as 40%. In other words, this person has 60% confidence in her language capabilities.

C = 0.5
WE = 0.3
T = 0.4
RT = 0.25

Now, we substitute these percentages into the model as follows:

CI = Sum of { 5 X 0.4 and 4 X 0.5 and 3 X 0.3 and 2 X 0.4 and 1 X 0.25 }

CI = 5.95

The figure was checked and confirmed by the participant as a lower challenge. In other words, this particular expatriate did not feel that she had a great deal of difficulty residing and working in Japan.

It should be noted that this model, as suggested above, provides a figure as a guide which can be used for comparison purposes with other expatriates. It can also provide an opportunity for performing what-if analyses. Hence, the user of the model can relax a factor, increase or decrease its percentage and then determine some guiding figures. If the person in question, for instance, decides that they have made some progress with the language and their difficulty for it deserves a lower percentage then they may choose a smaller percentage than fifty. As this is intended to be a heuristic rather than a rigorous model, it is therefore suggested that larger increments such 25%, 50%, 75% and are used.

Conclusions

Based on in depth interviews with western business people, learners and educators who reside in Japan, this paper has investigated the challenges facing expatriates wanting to engage in business and education in Japan.

The paper has proposed a heuristic model for determining the Challenge Index for a prospective expatriate or western person wishing to reside and work in Japan. The model has the potential for comparative or what-if analysis by someone who wishes to monitor and adjust the challenges and difficulties facing them in a different situation. The model requires further enhancements based on additional data for testing and further development. Hence, future research projects related to the enhancement of this model are envisaged.

In conclusion, it is recommended that the expatriate should go to Japan with an open mind, adapt their existing western attitudes and instead adopt the Japanese ways when possible.

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