

Bridging the Talent Gap: Human Capital Mobility as a New Pillar of Japan-CEE Relations

by Akane Nakazawa

The Importance of the Foreign Workforce in Japan

Over the past few years, there has been a growing demand for foreign workers in Japan because of companies' attempt for globalization and a declining working population. In fact, lots of foreigners are contributing to Japanese society as the workforce. Currently, foreign workers with a residence status for 'Technical Intern Training' or 'Technical and Professional Fields' are increasing, and they are mostly from Asian states such as Vietnam and China. In particular, as companies advance their global management strategies, demand for highly skilled foreign talent is increasing. Furthermore, to achieve global expansion across diverse regions and foster diversity within organisations, it is necessary to recruit personnel from an even wider range of nationalities and regions, in addition to those originating from Asia.

Japanese Learners in Central and Eastern Europe as Highly Skilled Workers

Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) notes that international students in Japan are highly skilled foreign professionals in the making. The JETRO report states that 'in promoting corporate globalisation, there are high expectations for the language skills and international sensibilities possessed by foreign personnel, with particularly strong demand for the knowledge and technical skills held by highly skilled foreign personnel' (Japan External Trade Organisation, 2024). Consequently, the utilisation of foreign language abilities, such as English, is expected of foreign personnel.

However, regarding foreign students studying in Japan, a DISCO survey of Japanese companies conducted in 2023 revealed that foreign students expected to work within Japan are generally required to possess a certain level of Japanese language proficiency as a prerequisite. The number of Japanese language learners worldwide is on the rise.

Among these, the proportion of learners studying at higher education institutions or Japanese language schools—a category expected to contribute as highly skilled foreign talent—is particularly marked in the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) region. This presents an opportunity to further promote diversity and secure highly skilled foreign professionals.

Difficulties with Getting and Working in Japanese Companies for Foreigners

International students wishing to find employment in Japan account for about 50% of the total. However, regarding employment for international students, numerous challenges are frequently cited, including the limited number of job vacancies targeted at foreigners, a lack of understanding of Japan's unique job-hunting system, and difficulties in taking tests and conducting interviews in Japanese. Concerns regarding Japanese language proficiency and a lack of information on career paths and the eligibility of international students for employment stand out as significant challenges in the job-hunting process. It can be said that, in addition to international students themselves actively gaining knowledge about the job-hunting process, there is a greater need for support from educational institutions and for companies to provide information aimed at international students.

Furthermore, the difficulties faced by foreign employees working in Japanese companies include the indirect communication style, as well as cultural challenges relating to corporate systems and working practices—such as recruitment methods, working hours, long holidays and pay—and dissatisfaction with operational aspects concerning promotion and decision-making. For Japanese speakers in particular, linguistic difficulties arise, such as the need for proficiency in Japanese, including polite language (keigo) and business Japanese. With regard to corporate culture and employment, it is possible that some foreign employees are attracted to the distinctive characteristics of Japanese companies, whilst in other cases, it may be difficult for the Japanese companies themselves to implement change. Therefore, although a certain degree of adaptation to Japanese corporate culture is necessary for foreign employees working in Japan, it is certainly true that the cultural and institutional mismatch between foreign employees and Japanese companies is resulting in lost opportunities.

Strategic Recommendations

Solutions to these issues need not be confined to initiatives within Japan; rather, through collaboration between Japan and Central and Eastern Europe, we can unlock the potential of these international students and foreign workers, enabling them to fully demonstrate their capabilities.

Specifically, this involves establishing an ecosystem through collaboration between public bodies, think tanks and educational institutions in Japan and the EU—including Poland—rather than relying solely on the individual efforts of Japanese companies, such as reducing language proficiency requirements in recruitment, providing Japanese language training after hiring, and introducing internship programmes. In making this proposal, to ensure that this does not result in a one-way outflow of talent from Europe, it should be aimed to build a mutually beneficial structure—attracting talented Eastern European professionals whilst contributing to the future economic development of Eastern Europe—by fostering a 'brain circulation' ecosystem in which Eastern European professionals who have gained experience in Japan become key personnel for Japanese companies expanding into Europe in the future. Firstly, to complement Japan's recruitment system, which is heavily reliant on CVs and interviews, it would be effective to increase employment opportunities for foreign talent by offering practical internship programmes in collaboration with universities and institutions in both countries. Furthermore, by providing a highly transparent information platform regarding visa acquisition and career paths in Japan—not limited to educational institutions such as universities and Japanese language schools, but extending to foundations and embassies—foreign talent seeking employment in Japan will be able to gather accurate information in their native language.

Conclusion

As Japan's labour shortage—driven by a declining birth rate and an ageing population—and the need for greater diversity within Japanese companies due to globalization have increased the market value of highly skilled foreign professionals, we have turned our attention to Japanese language learners from Eastern Europe. Although they are highly capable individuals who could thrive in Japan, the country's job-hunting system and corporate culture are causing them to miss out on opportunities.

As a solution to this situation, we propose the establishment of an ecosystem based on cooperation between Japan and the Eastern European region. It is important for both countries to work together to create a cycle that ensures the inflow of Eastern European talent into Japan does not result in a loss for Eastern European nations, but rather leads to subsequent contributions to and economic growth in the region.

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