

# Japanese Recruitment Practices —Before and After the Global Financial Crisis—

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*Over the past decade, Japanese companies have had to reexamine their personnel management strategies to deal with staffing issues and a rapidly changing economic environment. Furthermore, the global financial crisis in the fall of 2008 forced many Japanese companies to adapt their personnel management practices. Although recruitment is only one part of the personnel management system, it provides insight into understanding the overall management system. Past research has indicated that Japanese company recruitment practices have been resistant to change. The purpose of this paper is to examine recent recruitment practices to determine whether this is still the case. This paper focused on recruitment practices in large Japanese companies from 2006-2011. Information was obtained using company data, newspaper articles, company surveys, and government related data such as white papers. It was found that many large companies have adapted recruitment practices in varying degrees to deal with the changing economic environment. These changes include varying the number of hires, diversifying hiring conditions, extending the recruitment schedule, and dealing with labor turnover issues. The implications of these changes and the impact on companies and university students are then discussed.*

**JEL Classification:** J21, J22, J23

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past decade, Japanese companies have had to adapt their personnel management strategies to deal with staffing issues and a rapidly changing economic environment. In many companies, a large number of older workers born during Japan's baby boom have begun to retire. Also, an increasing number of young employees have been quitting their jobs within a few years of being hired. The issue of employee-company mismatch has become a serious concern for many companies. Furthermore, the global financial crisis in the fall of 2008 forced many Japanese companies to reexamine their personnel management practices. These factors have led many companies to reassess various management practices including recruitment.

Past research has indicated that Japanese company recruitment practices have been resistant to change (Robinson, 2003; Jacoby, 2005). The purpose of this paper is to examine recent recruitment practices to determine whether this is still the case. Thus this research focused on recruitment practices in large Japanese companies from 2006-2011. This study thus contributes to the recruitment litera-

ture by providing an updated account of recruitment practices in Japan.

Although recruitment is only one part of the personnel management system, it provides insight into understanding the overall management system, and in particular, issues Japanese companies are facing and the amount of change taking place. Compared with other personnel practices in Japanese companies, information relating to recruitment tends to be more openly available from companies and in the media. Information was obtained using company data, newspaper articles, company surveys, and government related data such as white papers.

Recruitment practices in large traditional companies were examined. These large companies tend to be the trend setters in terms of personnel practices in Japan. This research also concentrated on the recruitment of university graduates. University graduates have been regarded as the core company employees and future company managers.

The next section examines traditional Japanese recruitment practices. This is followed by sections that examine various recruitment practices during the period 2006-2011. These include increasing and decreasing the number of hires, diversifying hiring conditions, extending the recruitment schedule, dealing with labor turnover and recruitment practices at Sony. The implications of these practices and the impact on companies and university students are then discussed in the final section.

## 2. Traditional Japanese Recruitment Practices

The recruitment practices used in Japanese companies in the 1970s and 1980s was viewed as having some unique characteristics. Recruitment in large Japanese companies was systematic and based on a specific year long schedule. This early recruitment process is often referred to as “*aotagai*” (buying rice before it is harvested) since students were recruited far in advance of graduation (Jackson & Tomioka, 2004). Recruitment was seen as the beginning of a long-term relationship between the company and individual (Takeda, 2002).

University graduates were hired as core employees. Preference was given by companies to students from prestigious universities. Companies tended to place emphasis on personality, motivation and communication skills as selection criteria (Sasaki, 1990). In the social science area, little emphasis was placed on what was studied in university or on the specific skills or experiences of the candidate (Haak & Pudelko, 2005). In the natural sciences, in particular, students were often recommended to companies by their professors.

The recruitment season usually began in April when a student entered fourth year. The applicant would have to pass a number of written tests and interviews. The interviews were regarded as the most important part of the selection process. During this process, students were given little input with regard to their future job or work location.

After this process was completed, an advance agreement of employment was reached with the applicants. This advance agreement of employment with applicants is still used by companies today. These students would then all start together the following year in April. Recruits would join a company without

knowing which position or department they would be joining.

During the 1990s, the Japanese economy went into a prolonged recession and this impacted the recruitment practices in many companies. To deal with the recession, companies were forced to cut labor costs. One way this was done was to hire more part-time workers and reduce the number of full-time employees (Kono & Clegg, 2001). This was a big change from recruitment practices in the 1980s when companies actively increased the number of full-time employees.

### 3. Recent Recruitment Practices

#### 3.1 Companies Increase Hiring 2006-2008

From 2003-2008, the overall economy was recovering and many companies saw their sales and profits rise. As well, companies were concerned about the increasing number of retirees. Japanese baby boomers had started to retire in 2007. Companies had been looking for replacements for these employees and also planning for the future. These factors led companies to increase the number of recruits from universities from 2003-2008. In 2007, these numbers were similar to the number of new recruits hired in 1990 at the peak of the economic bubble. Recruitment became a sellers market (Works Institute, 2006).

This section focuses on the recruitment of university students graduating in 2007. Many large companies increased the number of recruits for four consecutive years leading up to 2007. In 2007, around 44 percent of the company's surveyed indicated they were going to hire more than the previous year (BHCP, 2006). 47 percent of the companies stated that they would be hiring about the same number as last year. Of the 2800 companies surveyed, it was indicated that these companies would be hiring on average around 20 percent more university graduates than the previous year (NKS, 2006).

The number of jobs available per job applicant also increased from 1.6 in 2006 to over 1.9 percent for students graduating in 2007 (Works Institute, 2006). This rate had been rising steadily over the past few years. This indicated that over the past few years recruitment had become a sellers market. University graduates had many more choices than in the past few years. Thus it was a good time to be a university student looking for a job Japan as companies were actively looking to hire good young workers. It was said that in 2007, it was actually the students who were choosing the companies.

This increase was greater in certain industries such as those related to financial services. These included banks, securities companies, and insurance companies. Some large banks were planning to hire around 2000 new employees in 2007. This included Mitsubishi Tokyo (2000) and Mizuho FG (2300). Some of the securities companies such as Nikko Cordial (1000) and Daiwa Securities (1400) would also be hiring large numbers of recruits (*Toyo Keizai*, 2007). Four of the largest insurance companies would be hiring around 900 employees each. In most of these companies this was the largest number of recruits since 1990. Many of these financial service companies sharply reduced hiring in the 1990s due to problems related to the collapse of the economic bubble.

There were a number of reasons why companies were hiring more. A 2006 Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare survey examined these reasons (MHLW,

2006). The main reason cited by companies in this survey was to hire and train young full-time employees to ensure their company's future. The second reason cited was to help companies continue to expand and grow into new areas. The third reason cited was to hire more young employees to stimulate creativity within the company. The fourth reason was to reinvigorate the company and balance out the age structure.

### **3.2 Companies Decrease Hiring 2009-2011**

With the global financial crisis in the fall of 2008, Japanese companies drastically changed their recruitment strategies. The financial collapse in 2008 forced many Japanese companies to restructure including cutting back on recruitment. From 2009, most companies decided to decrease the number of the university students from the previous year. In 2009 companies made 13% fewer job offers than in the previous year (NKS, 2009a). This trend also continued in 2010. For students graduating in 2010, companies were offering 34% fewer job offers. For students graduating in March 2010, the manufacturing sector decreased the number of students they were recruiting by 36% (NKS, 2009b). This meant that in 2010 there would be over 100,000 university students graduating without jobs (NKS, 2010a).

Even in 2011 with companies now recovering, many are still hesitant to actively increase the number of recruits. For students graduating in March 2011, the number of students who have still been unable to find jobs is a much higher than in the past. This is a much more serious problem in Japan where entry into companies after graduation from university is the main opportunity to become a core employee. As of December 1, 2010 only 68.8% of university students who were looking for jobs had been able to find them (NKS, 2011). This percentage is the lowest since 1996. In comparison, in December 2007, 80% of the students had already received job offers (NKS, 2008a).

One of the causes is an imbalance due to the type of companies that university students are applying to. The vast majority of students are applying to the prestigious large companies and often do not consider smaller and medium-sized companies which are also looking to hire recruits. This means that there is an oversupply of applicants for these large famous companies and a shortage of applicants for small and medium-sized companies.

### **3.3 Diversity in Hiring Conditions**

In the past, most university graduates joined as generalist employees with little job choice. These employees were transferred to various departments within the company in different locations around the country every few years. Some companies allowed recruits to choose which job area or department they would like to work in. Of the company's surveyed, 31 percent responded that they provided some occupational choice when recruiting (Natsume, 2007). Some companies offered a number of specific career courses from which to choose from. For example, Matsushita Electronics offers 16 career courses to choose from. Some companies even allow employees to list their preference for their first job placement. Companies hoped that giving these recruits some choice in the type of job

they would be doing would help to attract better applicants.

A number of companies were also hiring some university graduates as contract employees (*Toyo Keizai*, 2008). Some of the first companies to introduce this were the airline companies when hiring cabin attendants. The railway companies and travel agencies which were also popular companies among university students were also using this kind of contract employment. In this case, these recruits were hired as contract employees for a number of years and then after this fixed period they could become full-time employees. Although these companies were popular places to work among university students, these jobs tend to demand a lot of work, long hours and are low paid. Thus the separation rate tended to be high. Also among some of the financial services such as large banks, some of the office workers and store sales staff were also hired as contract employees.

There has been an increase in the number of companies that allow new hires to work in a particular city of their choice (Natsume, 2007). In the past this was limited to a few industries such as for female employees in the retail sector. Recently this is becoming more common in the financial services such as with banks like Mizuho and Mitsubishi Tokyo. What is different from the past is that these individuals who choose to work in one location were hired as career track employees. In the past these individuals would have been hired as local employees with limited promotion opportunities.

More companies were also actively hiring university graduates who have worked for a few years and quit their companies to apply along with regular university graduates (JILPT, 2005). Nearly 60 percent of large companies actively recruited these so-called “*dainisotsugyosha*” (second graduates). These were individuals who graduated from university and had worked for less than three years. Some surveys indicate that companies view these second graduates as better in some ways than regular university students because they already have some experience in the work world. This is rather different from the past where getting a job with a large company was seen as a once in a lifetime chance directly after graduating from university.

In 2011, more companies are taking a diverse approach to recruitment. Some companies such as Toyota Motor and Takeda Pharmaceutical have also started considering candidates up to three years after they have graduated (Dickie, 2011). This might allow young Japanese time to study overseas and develop a variety of skills before entering the workforce.

More companies have begun to actively recruit foreign students (KN, 2010). Increasing the number of foreign students is seen as a good move for global companies. What is different recently is that many companies are hiring foreign students on equal terms as Japanese students and looking at them as potential management candidates. They are looking at having these recruits eventually return to their home countries and work there in management positions. In particular, companies are looking at hiring students from Asian countries with growing markets such as China and Indonesia.

### **3.4 Extended Recruitment Schedule**

The recruitment season for university students traditionally began one year

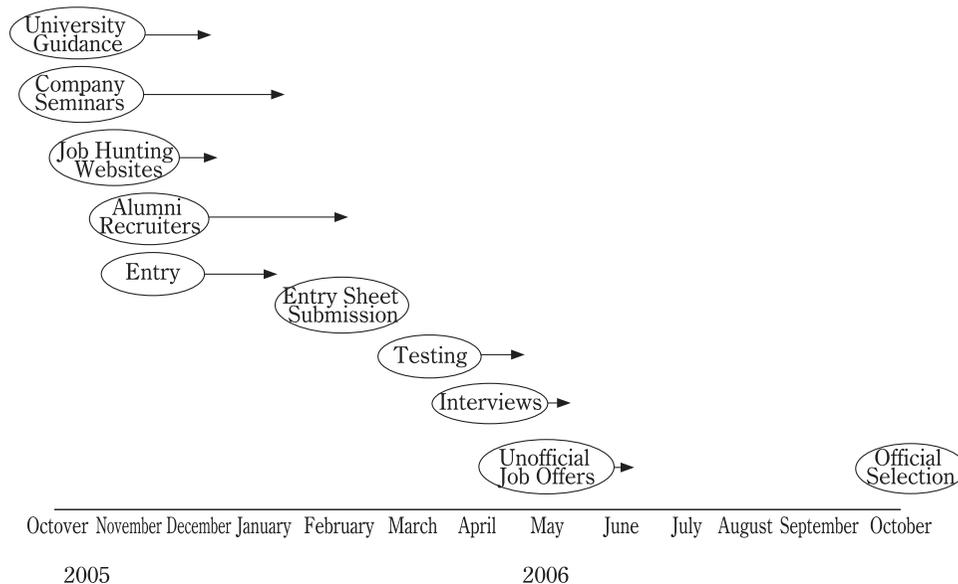
before entering a company in April at the beginning of a student's fourth year. From 2003-2007 it was a sellers market, and employers appeared to be a rush to get talented young workers thus the process was pushed forward almost half a year. Thus students began the recruitment process in the second half of their third-year. Figure 1 displays the recruitment schedule for university students graduating in March 2007.

In the past, there were concerns about companies starting recruitment too early and the effects on students and their university studies. This led to the Federation of Economic Organizations (*Keidanren*) issuing ethical guidelines for companies regarding the recruiting process (*Keidanren, 2006a*). These guidelines are essentially a gentleman's agreement among companies as to when to officially start and when to officially make job offers. In accordance with these guidelines, job offers can not be made official until October 1<sup>st</sup>, six months before joining a company.

The following is a breakdown of the recruitment process for university students graduating in March 2007. The recruitment season began in September of a student's third year. In 2005, the first big recruitment event took place in late August at a public location in Tokyo. Over 70 large companies took part as well as tens of thousands of students. Much of the content was general such as industry outlooks, talks about work life and career development seminars.

When students returned to university in October, a number of university career centers began offering job hunting guidance seminars. At the beginning of October, a number of jobs hunting sites (such as *rikunavi*) opened. This was two weeks earlier than 2004. These web sites offer general job information about companies as well as information on where seminars would be held throughout the country.

**Figure 1: Recruitment Schedule for University Students Graduating in March 2007**



Starting in October, on campus company seminars began. Companies came on campus and talked in general terms about working for companies and industry outlooks. It was seen by companies as a way to get a jump start and introduce themselves to the new group of recruits. At this stage, companies did not have individual meetings with students.

At some company seminars, students participated in group activities. Students were given general problems to solve together. Companies were trying to spot students with leadership and problem solving abilities. Companies hoped that students who did well in these group activities might be interested in applying to this company.

Another strategy was to send recent graduates back to their home universities to promote the company. These alumni recruiters would visit their former class seminars and clubs they attended at the university as well as taking some students out for dinner. Although these type of activities were popular in the past, they seemed to decrease in frequency in the 1990s and had only recently started to become popular again. In some companies, these alumni recruiters were asked to target and nominate one or two students. They might also encourage students to take part in a company internship.

The use of alumni became popular again for number of reasons (Natsume, 2007). It is seen as one possible way to help prevent mismatch by having students nominate individuals who they know fairly well and they think might be a good fit for the company. Second, many recruiters were unhappy with the online process which usually takes place at this stage. Many feel that the online process is not a good way to get a good feel for these applicants. As well, it is a way to maintain the gentleman's agreement among companies about early recruiting but still get a head start.

Smaller seminars were also common during the early stages. Many of the early seminars tended to be larger events with a few individuals talking to hundreds of students. A number of companies held smaller events to allow students to talk with younger employees from the company. These mini-seminars were seen as a way for students to talk more directly with people closer to their own age and also encourage more direct contact.

A number of companies held events for students who were planning to apply to meet in small groups with young employees. Many of these young recruiters would then meet with the personnel staff to pass on their comments and suggestions about potential recruits. These meetings with younger employees provided a number of benefits. These meetings provided students with a real picture of the company to help prevent mismatch. It was also seen as a way to develop a connection between these students and younger employees which could be followed up through later recruitment stages and also as a mentor after joining the company.

In November, many companies opened their recruitment website. This is when students make their first contact with a company (referred to as entry). Students sign up at this website to request company recruitment materials. Students also receive an application form (referred to as an entry sheet) when they sign up. Later in the process students submit their entry sheet online. In many

large companies, the deadline for submitting applications was February 15<sup>th</sup>. Thus, the entire application process takes place over the Internet.

Students can request information from as many companies as they wanted. In early 2006, students requesting information from companies showed the following trends: over 34 percent of the students had contacted more than 40 companies, another 42 percent had contacted between 11 and 40 companies to get information and 23 percent of the students contacted less than 10 companies to sign up and get information (BHCP, 2006).

The following data was found regarding students who had submitted applications (entry sheets) to companies in 2006. 81 percent submitted applications to 10 companies or less, 18 percent submitted to between 11 and 40 companies and one percent submitted applications to over 40 companies. These numbers were lower than in the previous year.

There were a number of reasons why students submitted fewer applications (Natsume, 2007). One reason was that students realized that it was a sellers market. Thus they were not so insecure that they had to send out to a large number of applications and concentrated on the companies that they most wanted to enter. Also, the process for submitting entry sheets changed slightly in 2006. Many companies required students to attend workshops as a precondition to accept entry sheets. This was seen as a way of screening out students who were not so interested. Some entry sheets also included an essay section which was difficult and time consuming to screen out students who were not so interested.

Although most companies had agreed to start interviews in April, in reality, most companies started their interview process in March. The way around the gentleman's agreement was to get young company employees to meet with students in a group format. In some cases, students were required to meet a number of times with employees from a single company in March.

The peak of the recruitment season began in April as most companies honored the gentleman's agreement. A number of companies started interviewing on Monday, April 3<sup>rd</sup>. Since in many large companies informal interviews had already begun in March, by April it was already into the later stages of the final interviews. By mid-April, some companies were already starting to make unofficial job offers. From mid to late April most of the large companies made unofficial job offers. Many companies had finished their initial recruitment process by the end of April. Some companies continued on with this process into June, especially large companies doing large scale recruiting.

The majority of job hunting university students (80 percent) had received unofficial job offers by the end of May 2006 (BHCP, 2006). Still many of the students (70 percent) were continuing to job hunt. The reason for this was that they didn't get their first choice or that they were looking for a better company. 57 percent of the students interviewed said that they had received an unofficial job offer from the company they were most interested in. In accordance with the gentleman's agreement, companies were only able to make official job offers from October 1<sup>st</sup>.

This basic recruitment schedule has remained the same until 2011. In early 2011, universities have begun appealing to companies to delay the start of re-

cruitment season until the fourth year (KN, 2011a). The Japan Business Federation is also trying to actively encourage companies to delay their recruitment process. Furthermore a couple of large trading companies have announced that from 2013 they will shorten their recruitment season (NKS, 2010b). These companies are very popular and thus not worried that starting later will be a disadvantage to them. They are also hoping that this will lead to other companies doing the same.

### 3.5 Declining Job Offers and Labor Turnover

As these unofficial job offers (advance agreements) were made often one year in advance, companies were concerned that recruits were changing their minds sometime during their fourth year. Many companies were active from April until September to try to make sure that students who received a job offer would not later turn it down. Companies took various actions to deal with this concern (*Keidanren*, 2006b). Ninety percent of the companies invited the recruits out for dinner or other small gatherings. 57 percent contacted recruits regularly by email. 50 percent contacted them regularly by mail or telephone. 37 percent got recruits to take part in an Internet community with other recruits from the same company.

There were various reasons why recruits declined job offers. The main reason for declining a job offer was that the student got a job from another company. Recruits also cited becoming discouraged after talking to individuals from that company other than recruiters. Another reason was that the company didn't contact them after they received the job offer. Others changed their mind because it didn't seem like they would be able to do what they really wanted to do in that company.

As well as applicants declining job offers, companies were also concerned about labor turnover among young employees. Companies have had to deal with an increasing number of young employees who quit their jobs within a few years after being hired. Even among university students, recent data suggests that over 35 percent of these graduates will leave their job within three years of being hired (MHLW, 2006). It should be noted that separation rates are lower in larger companies. Labor turnover was a major concern for companies which had placed a great deal of time and resources into recruiting and then training these new recruits during the first few years after being hired. Companies were thus trying to decrease potential labor turnover through their recruitment process.

One way companies have dealt with this concern was to make use of internships. In some cases, internships became a prerequisite to apply to a company. It was hoped that by observing potential recruits on the job, employers could get a better idea of a recruit's potential and whether this was a good match for the company and this individual. Other companies were simply factoring in turnover when doing recruitment. They were thus hiring more recruits under the assumption that some recruits would leave within the first few years.

Activities aimed at preventing labor turnover continued to be used after the recruit entered the company. Companies set up systems to help new recruits get adjusted to their new jobs. These systems include mentoring by a senior employee slightly older than the recruit. Some companies were also encouraging new

employees to live together in company dormitories (NKS, 2008b). It was hoped that mentors and dorm mates would provide a support network to help these new recruits.

In 2011, even though the current conditions appear not that good for university students, the number of students who are turning down job offers is still high (NKS, 2010c). One reason for this is that many students continue job hunting even after they have received job offers as they are trying to find an even better job. Another reason is that the same students from the same prestigious universities end up getting numerous job offers.

### 3.6 Recruitment Practices at Sony

In April 2007, Sony recruited a total number of 400 university graduates. Seventy graduates were from the social sciences (17.5 percent, an increase from 40 in 2006), and the rest 330 were from natural sciences (82.5 percent, an increase from 190 in 2006) (*Toyo Keizai*, 2008). No students from junior colleges or special schools were recruited in April 2007.

Until recently, Sony's recruitment practices were similar to the traditional recruitment practices in many Japanese companies. In recent years there have been indications of major changes in Sony's recruitment system. The following are a number of these changes: the abolishment of the university recommendation system, a flex entry system, a flex career start system, a draft interview and hiring more foreign recruits (Nakata, 2005).

One major change in Sony's recruitment practice was the abolishment of recruitment through recommendation from top universities. In the 1970s and 1980s, many large corporations in Japan used this practice in order to recruit the most promising new graduates from elite universities. Sony was no different and its recruitment practices up until 2004 was partly based on recommendations from universities. Sony abolished this system from 2004, partly because it was felt this system was not functioning as well as in the past. Sony executives found that such a system was unnecessary, if not hindering the recruitment of skilled students. The new recruitment system was implemented in spite of some resistance within the company.

The second change was the flex entry system. Most Japanese large firms held their interviews on the weekends in April and May. As a result, students could only apply to a limited number of companies because they could not attend all the company interviews. This situation was also unfortunate for companies because they could only interview a limited number of students. Therefore, Sony dispersed its entries to four times a year from 2005 to April, May, June, and August. The criteria for selection were all the same in all four entry periods and an applicant could apply more than once as long as they applied for a different type of job. Moreover, Sony chose to outsource the paperwork part of the recruiting so that Sony and its staff could concentrate on the interviews (Nakata, 2005).

The third change in Sony's recruitment system was the creation of a flexible career start system. From 2006, Sony has been offering its applicants a chance to choose whether they would like to enter the company from April 1<sup>st</sup> or another time during the next two years. Recruits must have a good reason when request-

ing a later start, such as studying abroad or finishing up their research. The main idea behind this policy was that students could think about their careers, and through this, Sony could support their desire to try things which could not be done at school or in the company (NW, 2005a).

The fourth change in Sony's recruitment policy was the draft interview (NW, 2005b). An applicant who successfully passed all stages of recruitment, could know in advance their future placement in the company. This was due to a change in the interview process in which the role of the human resource department had been diminished compared to the role of the specific departments that wished to recruit a specific candidate. In the final interview, candidates had direct contact with representatives of the department that wished to hire them and therefore they could know their future department (Nakata, 2005).

The fifth change in Sony's recruitment system was the active recruitment of foreign students. This trend of hiring more foreign recruits has continued over the past few years. Sony announced that in spring 2010, 4% of those recruited were of foreign nationality and in 2011, they would like to increase this to 14%. Sony even announced that they will increase the number of the foreign recruits to 30% of the total number by 2013 (KN, 2011b).

#### **4. Discussion**

Two divergent economic trends appeared to be impacting recruitment practices from 2006-2011. The first was the recovering economy in 2006-2008 that combined with baby boomers retiring led to the job market for university graduates becoming a sellers market. The second trend was the financial collapse in 2008 that caused companies to reassess their recruitment strategies. These two trends seem to be in conflict with regard to recruitment practices. On one hand, as it was a sellers market from 2006-2008, companies were in a hurry to recruit a large number top students. On the other hand, given the recent economic turmoil, companies have been more deliberate and cautious while recruiting a smaller number of students from 2009-2011 as it is a buyers market.

A number of issues have been raised regarding future recruitment practices. The extent of diversification in terms of flexibility, choice for applicants, and increased hiring of foreign recruits should be further examined. There appears to be a gradual acceptance among companies of labor mobility among students. Allowing students more choice and flexibility may be necessary to attract and keep top individuals. It will be interesting to see whether the Sony recruitment system will become more of a benchmark among Japanese companies.

Follow up studies should examine the effects of recent changes in recruitment practices and their impact on decreasing the number of job offers declined and preventing labor turnover. Although most of the early stages of the recruitment process have gone online and become impersonal with large seminars, this may be one reason for the increasing mismatch over the past few years. Thus the small group seminar style may be effective to help both sides to better understand one another early on in the recruitment process.

Given all the challenges faced by Japanese companies in a changing global

environment, it might be necessary for Japanese companies to rethink the process of mainly hiring university graduates once a year. One view is that given the changing global world of business, this system is no longer effective. However, many company executives still believe that this process of hiring university graduates to become future company leaders is still the best approach. In a recent survey, almost 68% of executives said that it would be best to continue this process as a way of the developing future company leaders and ensure the long-term success of the company (NKS, 2010d).

In the past, successful Japanese companies made necessary changes to deal with a changing economic environment while maintaining the stronger aspects of the traditional management system. Given the rapidly changing economic environment in recent years, companies appear to be adapting their recruitment strategies. As recruitment practices change, this will also impact other parts of the personnel system in Japanese companies.

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