

***A CONSIDERATION OF THE RECENT SITUATION OF
HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT
(AND WORKPLACE ACTIVITIES)
IN JAPANESE COMPANIES***

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A Consideration of the Recent Situation of Human Resource Development (and Workplace Activities) in Japanese Companies

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Abstract

This paper discusses the situation of human resource development in Japanese companies. First, I will introduce the human resource development that has been conducted by many large Japanese companies. Then, I will present a summary of the recent situation of human resource development and workplace activities in Japanese companies. The following is an overview of the recent situation of human resource development and workplace activities. (1) The stronger linkage between corporate strategies and human resource strategies is increasingly expected. (2) In a changing environment and situation, or in the changing way of education, expectations for the role of middle manager are higher than ever before. (3) Employees are being encouraged to pursue learning by self-selection, and individual awareness of career development is becoming more important. (4) After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, further attempts to utilize new means of education are being promoted - including the good use of both online and in-person training. (5) Learning not only within the company but also outside the company is becoming more important. Now, human resource development in Japanese companies is entering a new era.

Keyword: human resource development; Japanese companies; diversified educational (training) means; career development

JEL Classification: L22; M16; M53; M54

Company-wide level-specific education to date:

Many large Japanese companies have traditionally created and implemented a company-wide education system. Most company-wide education systems are designed to organize what kind of education to provide, to what level, and by what method.

The HR department, based on an understanding of the company-wide situation, establishes company-wide employee education issues and various themes necessary for the education of each level of employees. Education methods are then selected in line with each theme.

Level-specific education centered on such a company-wide training system has traditionally been implemented because it is seen as having several benefits, including:

1. Promoting the sharing of company-wide and departmental strategies

Share the strategy, the image of human resources required to realize the strategy, and company-wide efforts in human resource development.

2. Reform the organizational culture

Accelerate the creation of a corporate culture that nurtures people by promoting company-wide human resource development activities. Encourage the creation of an environment that promotes employee learning.

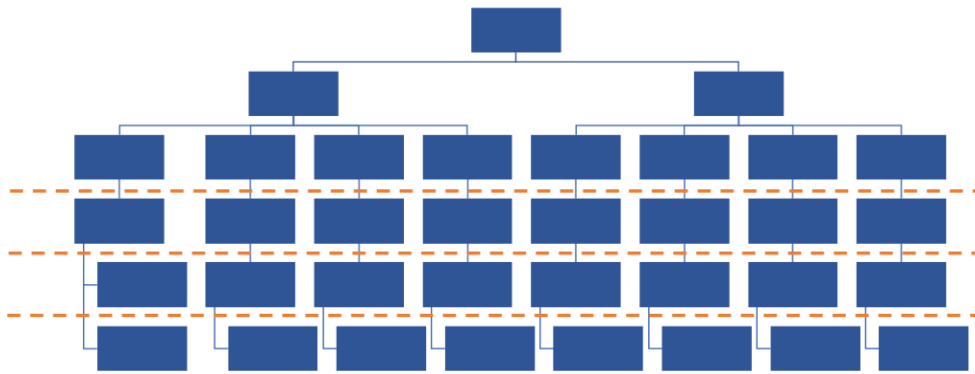
3. Improve employee performance

Improve problem-solving skills at each workplace, offer training by supervisors and employees, provide necessary support to young employees for their fast growth, and pass on know-how.

An important education program based on such a company-wide education system is the company-wide, level-specific training for each job level.

In the level-specific training, employees of the same level from across the company or from all divisions gather in a room, where training is conducted. For example, employees who are newly appointed to positions such as section chiefs or entry-level managers, or those who have been with the company for 10 years or other years, gather together to attend training sessions. The training has learning objectives for each level, and employees learn through readings, exercises, discussions, and other activities. The training is designed to bring together employees from multiple professions, such as finance, sales, etc.

These level-specific training programs have also encouraged the creation of personal networks within the company that transcend divisions and job functions.



In many Japanese companies, company-wide initiatives for human resource development, such as level-specific training, have been regarded as important.

The impact of major changes in the environment on human resource development activities

The environment has changed significantly. For example, one of the changes in the environment is the diversification of people working in the workplace within an organization. Japanese society is becoming increasingly diverse. The same is true of the workplaces within organizations. In addition, more and more people are changing jobs, and there are more and more situations where people with diverse expertise, diverse experience, and diverse values work together in the same workplace.

Second, the birthrate is declining and the population is aging. Due in part to the declining birthrate and aging population, there are fewer young people in traditional companies, and more people than ever before are experiencing staff shortages in the workplace.

The third is the expectation of digitalization: as the use of AI and the general use of online meeting systems have become more common, new ways of working are expected.

Fourth, more innovation is now required. There are more and more situations in which the conventional ways of working no longer work.

Under these new circumstances, several aspects of human resource development activities have become more important.

Strengthening the linkage between corporate strategies and human resource development strategies

What has become more important in company-wide human resource development activities is to better align corporate strategy with human resource development strategy.

Until now in Japan, it has been important to consider corporate strategy when thinking about human resource development strategy. However, some aspects of the environment surrounding companies are now changing more drastically than ever before. In addition, the speed of change is also increasing. This means that human resource development plans that respond to changes in corporate strategy need to be modified in a more flexible manner, without being restricted to the way things have been done in the past.

In addition, human resource development is a medium- to long-term strategy. In this case, it is important to look ahead and link it to the company's strategy so that it will produce results in the future. It is natural that results may not be achieved now or in the short term. It may take years to see results, but human resource development activities must be carried out from a medium- to long-term perspective in order to implement the corporate strategy.

To this end, HR managers need to work more closely with management and more proactively than ever before with key departments.

“Human Capital Management” is now gaining importance in Japan. As corporate leaders are expected to recognize the importance of their employees once again and better implement human management. More emphasis is beginning to be placed on the linkage between management strategy and human strategy.

Up to this point, the perspective has been how to promote company-wide human resource development.

Balancing company-wide, level-specific training with employee development in individual workplaces.

In addition to company-wide level-specific training, Japanese companies are now beginning to strengthen the development of employees’ competencies by managers in individual workplaces. In other words, human resource development in the workplace.

Although human resource development in the workplace has been emphasized in Japan in the past, it is no longer easy to develop human resources in the workplace as the environment is changing. In such a changing environment, employee development by managers in the workplace is beginning to be strengthened. The reasons are as follows:

To increase the effectiveness of company-wide level-specific training.

In many Japanese companies, managers are providing more support to employees who have taken the training to apply their new knowledge they have learned in the level-specific training in the workplace.

One reason is to better link company-wide training with the execution of work in the workplace, by allowing employees to use the knowledge they have learned in company-wide level-specific training in the workplace. Employees are now expected to use the knowledge they gain from the company-wide level-specific training in the workplace and apply it to their actual work performance. Therefore, employees share what they have learned in the level-specific training with their managers at their workplace, discuss how to use the knowledge in their actual day-to-day work, and actually apply it. (In particular, human skills, for which it is difficult to immediately apply to the job simply by acquiring the knowledge, need to be improved through application in the workplace.) In this way, managers are now expected more than ever to support their employees in applying what they have learned in the level-specific training to their actual day-to-day work in the workplace.

Responding to changes in the environment, such as a more diverse workforce

Another reason why managers in the workplace have come to strengthen the training of their subordinates is in response to the aforementioned situation where members are becoming more diverse. As members have become more diverse, it has become difficult for managers to understand them. Each member has different values, thoughts, future interests, and career directions. In order to understand the differences among members and utilize them in

workplace management, it has become necessary for managers to develop human resources in the workplace through better communication with members. Managers are expected to flexibly change their training methods according to the individuality of each member.

Responding to staff shortages in the workplace

This is related to the shortage of people in the workplace. In many companies, there are fewer people in the workplace than before. Some say that the workload of each person's responsibilities is increasing. This means that each employee is now expected to demonstrate their respective abilities more than ever before. This is why managers need to have a clear understanding of each member's strengths and link them to the achievement of results in the workplace. Managers are now required more than ever to ensure that each and every employee achieves results.

Managers are now expected to set aside time for member development in a time crunch.

However, in many workplaces, managers are also unable to concentrate on management tasks because the number of employees in the workplace is smaller than before, and managers themselves have to act as one player or one person in charge. For example, in a sales department, some sales managers must not only engage in management activities, but must also act as a sales person and a player in the day-to-day activities of the sales department. If the manager spends more time on activities as a player, there will be less time for management activities. In many workplaces, managers also tend to spend less time communicating with workplace members.

This is why it is important in Japan these days for managers to regularly set aside time for individual discussions with members of the team. For example, managers should intentionally set aside time to meet with each member individually on a regular basis, even if only for a short period of time. By doing so, the manager can understand the work situation of each member, share issues for growth, and provide advice to support the member. This will also make it easier for managers themselves to manage their workplaces.

Status of On-the-Job training in the workplaces

-Veterans and senior employees other than managers train newcomers and younger employees at their workplaces. It is no longer easy to provide OJT.

Japanese companies have long valued on-the-job training (OJT), which means that senior employees, not only managers, train newcomers and junior employees at their workplaces. In recent years, it has become increasingly difficult to implement OJT, which used to be a well-developed practice in Japanese companies in the past.

Therefore, some companies are now wishing to strengthen OJT activities in the workplace as well.

If OJT is not conducted well, veteran employees will not be able to pass on their work know-how, and young and new employees will not be able to develop effectively.

Reflecting this situation, it is relatively common for some Japanese companies to ask us, SANNO Institute of Management, to support them in strengthening their internal OJT activities. (SANNO Institute of Management has been supporting human resource development in Japanese companies for many years.) The several reasons for such requests include the following. Table1 shows the reasons.

Table1: reasons for the requests of supporting their OJT

Reason 1	<p>“More and more veterans and senior employees in companies do not know much about how to do on-the-job training.”</p> <p>This is a situation where those who provide training do not know how to provide training and development. There is a situation in which those who take on the role of providing training and guidance have not had the experience of being well-trained recently, because their senior colleagues were busy when they were new or young employees themselves.</p> <p>Therefore, not a few companies are aware of the problem that those who provide training need to learn how to provide training, starting with how to communicate with each other.</p>
Reason2	<p>“Companies want to increase young employees' commitment to the company and the work by strengthening on-the-job training. Companies wish to improve the situation where young employees are not very positive about their work and the organization.”</p> <p>In some Japanese companies, conducting OJT activities is not just about senior employees and managers teaching newcomers and junior employees how to do their jobs, but also includes trying to increase newcomers' and junior employees' attachments to the workplace and the company by helping them develop good relationships with other employees and making it easier for newcomers and younger employees to work at the workplace. Based on strengthening on-the-job training, the companies try to increase the attachment of new and young employees to the workplace and the organization.</p>

	<p>Young employees, especially those who joined the company after the COVID-19 pandemic, may have lost the opportunity to receive adequate training from their seniors and managers. And to some extent, some companies are experiencing the current situation where young employees are not able to fully enhance their work skills.</p> <p>Not only are they not improving their work skills, but they are also not improving their attachment to the organization and their desire to work for this organization.</p> <p>Therefore, it is becoming more and more important for some Japanese companies to educate and encourage employees who entered the company after the COVID-19 Pandemic.</p>
Reason 3	<p>“The people in charge of on-the-job training are becoming more multileveled, which can make communication between the OJT person and newer or younger employees more difficult.”</p> <p>There are some workplaces in Japanese companies these days where the number of people in the workplace is smaller than before, and there are fewer senior employees in the same workplace who are close in age to the newer or younger employees. In such workplaces, senior employees who are much older than the newcomers and younger employees are expected to train the newcomers and younger employees. In other words, if a senior employee who is close in age to the newcomers or young employees and understands their feelings becomes a trainer, communication between the trainer and the newcomers or young employees who are being trained will be relatively easy. However, when an employee who is not as old as the newcomer or younger employee serves as a trainer for the newcomer or younger employee, communication can sometimes be difficult because the two are from different generations. It can be seen that it is becoming more important than ever to promote good on-the-job training by communicating across generations.</p>

In light of the various situations described above, there is also a movement to strengthen human resource development at each workplace where non-managers serve as trainers.

Companies have (reduced) or even abolished the use of level-specific training.

Although there are not so many at this time, some companies have abolished the level-specific training. By abolishing the level-specific training, companies will no longer have to specify training themes for each level of employees. Companies that have abolished the level-specific training promote human resource development activities that encourage employees to choose their own development themes. The HR department of such a company will prepare a variety of educational content and then allow employees to choose what they want to learn. Therefore, it is unlikely that the HR department will specify to employees that they must take training on the topic.

Although there has been a system in the past in which employees could choose their own training topics, it was often implemented in parallel with the level-specific training in which the company specified the training topics. This was a style of parallel training without abolishing the level-specific training. Recently, some companies have abolished the system.

The abolition of level-specific training and the fact that employees choose the topics they learn on their own means that more and more companies are encouraging self-responsibility and self-selection with regard to skills development. This is the abolition of level-specific training and the introduction of a system that allows employees to choose the content of their learning. They will draw their own picture of what they will learn.

Such a move would seem to be well suited to an increasingly diverse workplace. In other words, it seems to make it easier to deal with the fact that each individual has a different theme to learn, depending on the situation he or she is in and his or her own characteristics. Rather than everyone learning the same theme, the style is to clarify the theme that is more necessary for oneself and to advance one's own learning.

This trend also seems to be influenced by the evolution of technology. More and more people are using smartphones in their daily lives. E-learning such as short video materials are becoming easier to use. This is making it easier to provide training content on a variety of topics to employees. It is becoming easier to learn and obtain knowledge.

Employees are expected to be more proactive in their own career development - Not only companies that have abolished level-specific trainings, but also those that continue to offer level-specific trainings.

In order to operate more effectively a system in which employees choose what they learn by themselves by reducing or abolishing level-specific training, employees need to be motivated to develop their own skills. Employees are expected to clarify for themselves what kind of person they want to become, and what kind of skills they want to develop in order to better perform their jobs.

In this way, employees will be expected to take more initiative in their own career development.

This is not limited to those companies that have reduced or abolished the use of level-specific training, but also to those companies that continue to provide level-specific training.

Workplace conditions since the COVID-19 pandemic began

However, many workplace activities have changed in the wake of the Corona pandemic that occurred in 2020, and managers will also need to take such situations into account as they respond.

While the increase in telework (working from home) since the Corona pandemic has made work easier, it has also been pointed out that communication among workplace members has sometimes been biased toward online communication, and human relations within the workplace have become weak.

The Situation of Young Employees and Career Development

As mentioned briefly earlier regarding the situation of young employees, since the start of the Corona pandemic, they have lost the opportunity to receive adequate training from their managers and senior employees, and have been unable to improve their work skills. We have

also seen situations where diversity within the workplace has made it difficult for them to feel connected to others or to feel a sense of belonging.

Younger employees who joined the company after the Corona pandemic began do not know what the workplace was like before the Corona pandemic. Younger employees who joined the company after the coronal pandemic started have to build better relationships with workplace members, in some cases teleworking, which is different from the workplace activities before the Corona pandemic started. Some situations have been observed in which employees experience difficulties in building relationships in the workplace, find it difficult to find a direction for future career development, and are unable to enhance their positive attitude toward workplace activities.

Under these circumstances, it is becoming increasingly important for workplace managers to support young employees in building better relationships and enhancing their work skills, and to promote their proactive attitude toward career development while managing the workplace.

Recently, the "power of gratitude" has sometimes been noted with regard to creating connections among workplace members, between managers and members, creating a positive attitude toward work among members, and building a better organization. Historically, humans have valued "gratitude" since ancient times, and the effects of gratitude have been scientifically studied for about 20 years.

The feelings of gratitude that people have, also known as "feelings of connection," connect people to each other rather than divide them. Prof. Robert A. Emmons of the University of California, the prominent scientific researcher of gratitude, states the importance and effectiveness of gratitude in his book "Gratitude Works!"

Results of the assessment for young employees

SANNO Institute of Management has supported the human resource development of many companies and has conducted training programs. In the course of such training, we also conduct various assessments.

One of the assessments is an assessment to grasp the abilities of young employees. From the results of that assessment, we will capture trends in the abilities of young employees.

The next page (Figure1) shows the results of the assessment of the abilities of young employees in their 20s and younger. These are the trends in the abilities of young employees in their 20s and younger, although not only those who joined the company after the start of the Corona pandemic.

The number of respondents is 7546. Respondents are young employees in their 20s who will participate in SANNO's training program from April 2019 to January 2023. The results are the result of their self-responses.

The results are calculated in terms of deviation; 50 is based on the results of a survey conducted by SANNO in a number of companies.

The assessment is composed of 15 dimensions.

In this section, we will focus on only the next two.

“5. Envision and work on one's own future”

“3. Not Being defeated by the difficulties”

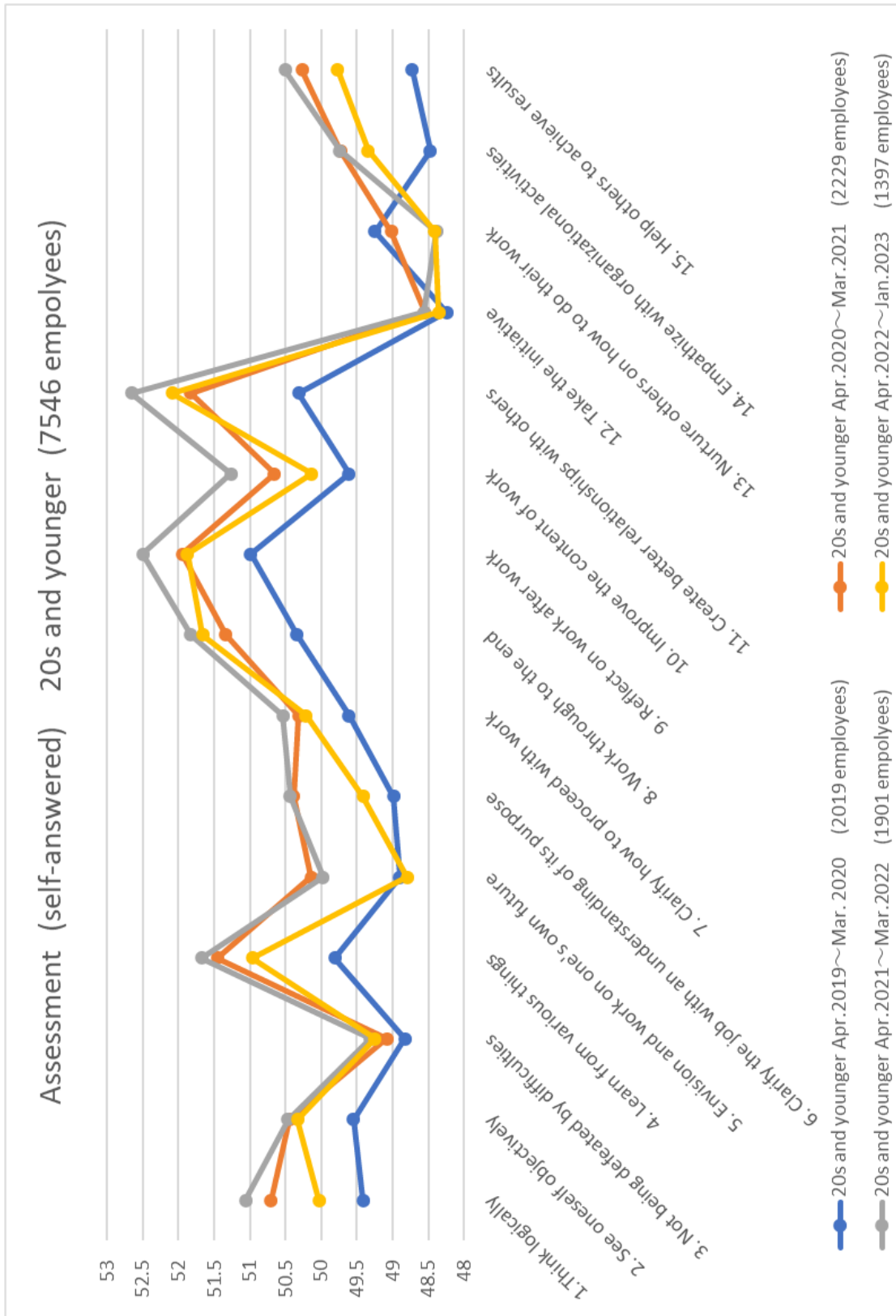


Figure1: Results of the assessment of the abilities of young employees in their 20s and younger

Table2 shows the main findings from the assessment results.

Table2: Findings from the assessment results

1	The ability to have an image of what they want to become in the future is not high.	“5. Envision and work on one's own future” means "the ability to always have an image of what one wants to become in the future and to work toward that image”. It can be said to be related to the ability to develop one's own career for the future. The result shows a slight decrease in this ability.
2	The ability to keep moving forward without being discouraged by difficulties and troubles is not very high.	The "3. Not being defeated by the difficulties" is also not very high. "3. Not being defeated by the difficulties" means "the ability to keep moving forward in the face of various difficulties and troubles without being discouraged “ . When encountering difficulties, the strength to overcome them does not seem to be very high. (It also indicates a tendency to be easily overcome by difficulties.)
others	There were also other results that were not so high.	“14. Empathize with organizational activities” (the ability to understand the philosophy and direction of the organization and to work enthusiastically toward its realization), “12. Take the initiative” (the ability to actively express one's own opinions and encourage others and the team), and “13. Nurture others on how to do their work” (the ability to teach one's knowledge and skills to others and junior staff, and to help them grow) are also not high.

Senior employees and managers in the workplace may need to understand and respond to these situations.

Employees in their 40s and 50s

Recently I and my colleagues had the experience of conducting career development training for employees in their 40s and 50s at several Japanese companies. In the past, I and my colleagues have rather often conducted career development training for employees in their 20s and 30s in terms of age, but recently we have been conducting career training for employees in their 40s and 50s, indicating that career development for such age groups has become somewhat more important. It seems that more attention is being paid to providing employees in their 40s and 50s with opportunities to rethink how they will perform in the future and to become more proactive regarding their career development. There is an increasing emphasis on opportunities for people in their 40s and 50s to think carefully about how they will advance their careers and how they will contribute to the organization in the future.

It seems that career development for each individual is becoming more important than ever before.

In the past, Japanese companies generally had job rotations based on the company's intentions, where employees learned about their jobs through work experience, starting from a state of not knowing what the job was about.

In such a situation, employees were sometimes passively engaged in the work assigned to them rather than developing their careers on their own initiative.

Therefore, there are some employees in their 40s and 50s who have taken a passive attitude toward their own career development for many years. It can be said that the passive attitude they have become accustomed to has been replaced by a proactive one.

Recently in Japan, reskilling and re-learning are being encouraged in human resource development, including the promotion of DX. Reskilling and re-learning can also be related to proactive (self-directed) career development.

Recent trends in workplace activities and workplace management

Here are the results of the assessment on the status of workplace activities answered by those who attended the SANNO training. Workplace managers and their members responded to the assessment. This assessment is used in the management training that workplace managers attend. The results are calculated around a deviation of 50; the 50 is based on the results of a survey conducted by SANNO Institute of Management at a number of companies.

The following graph (Figure2) shows the results for 1117 workplaces (managers), from the 31 companies where SANNO conducted the training, plus participants from several companies that attended SANNO's open seminars. The participants were selected for the period from April 2019 to January 2023. This assessment is based on 16 dimensions.

Without describing all 16 dimensions here, we will mention the following four dimensions used in this paper.

- 「5. members' motivation」
- 「4. Keyperson other than manager」
- 「11. Influence by keyperson」
- 「2. Leadership by the Manager」

Workplace Assessment (1117managers, 5664members) Apr.2019-Jan.2023

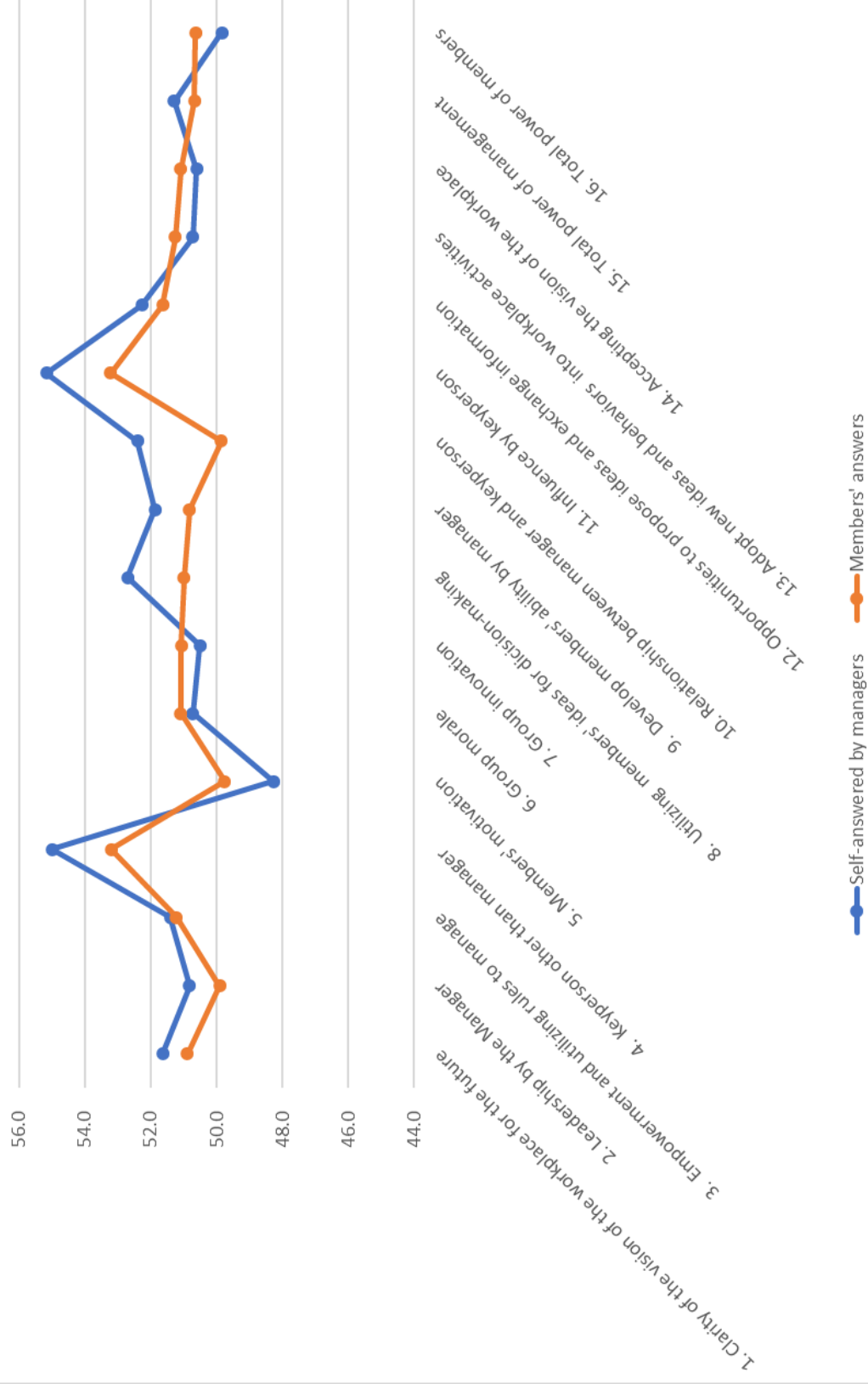


Figure2: Results of the assessment on the status of workplace activities and workplace management

Table3 shows the findings from the assessment results.

Tabale3: Findings from the assessment results		
1	Workplace members' motivation is not high.	<p>“5. members' motivation" indicates the degree of motivation of workplace members. The result shows that in terms of workplace activities, employees of Japanese companies are not very highly motivated toward their work.</p> <p>Many members do not seem to have a very positive attitude toward their work. As I mentioned earlier about the need for employees to take more initiative in their career development, it is becoming increasingly important for managers to address this situation of low employee motivation, as work motivation can also be related to career development initiative.</p>
2	In workplace activities, the influence of key persons other than the managers is greater than that of the managers' management.	<p>“4. Keyperson other than manager" refers to the extent to which other members recognize the existence of influential members other than the manager in the workplace.</p> <p>“11. Influence by keyperson" refers to the degree to which other members perceive the influence of members other than the manager to be significant in the workplace.</p> <p>“2. Leadership by the Manager" refers to the extent to which managers directly influence members.</p> <p>The results of "4. Keyperson other than manager," "11. Influence by keyperson," and "2. Leadership by the Manager" reveal the following.</p> <p>There are members in the workplace who have influence other than the workplace manager. The influence of those members is relatively large in workplace activities.</p> <p>“4. Keyperson other than manager" and “11. Influence by keyperson" are relatively high. Not only workplace managers, but also members with influence over workplace activities other than managers are found. In other words, the situation is that the workplace is managed not only by the manager but also by influential members other than the manager.</p>

		<p>There does not seem to be a great deal of managerial influence on members in the workplace.</p> <p>“2. Leadership by the Manager” is not very high. Managers are taking some actions to directly teach their members about their work and care for their feelings, but not much.</p>
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One possible future direction based on the results of the assessment of workplace activities.

Connecting corporate strategy, workplace mission and vision with individual members' career vision and career development in a better way. By doing so, workplace activities will be more activated.

In reference to the above results, it will be important for workplace managers to raise the motivation of workplace members in the future. In raising motivation, it will also be important to link this with activities that enhance members' initiative in career development. In doing so, it will be effective to link the realization of organizational strategies and workplace missions and visions with the career development of individual members in a better way. In addition, in the specific situations where this is promoted, workplace managers will need to build good relationships and cooperate with other influential members in the workplace in order to achieve more effective workplace management.

Use of different training methods in human resource development

Although training is increasingly conducted online, some HR managers prefer to conduct it in person. They are also increasingly using a variety of means. Among the companies that are still implementing level-specific training, the following situations have also been observed. The start of the Corona pandemic has led many companies to conduct their training online. However, as the years have passed since the Corona pandemic began, there is a certain amount of corporate HR managers who would like to see in-person training again. HR managers who prefer in-person training see group training not only as a place to learn certain content, but also as a place that has other benefits. For example, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper, they see it as an opportunity for training participants to network with each other within the company. Some HR managers would like to provide interaction with others who do not work together on a daily basis or do not communicate with each other in the course of their work through training breaks or post-training meals.

It seems that there is a greater expectation that in-house training programs should be used effectively in different ways, based on the educational theme, purpose, or target of the training, while understanding the characteristics of both online and in-person training programs.

For example, it is easier to hold multiple meetings online because travel costs are lower than in in-person meetings. And multiple meetings make it easier for participants to engage in practice between meetings. This will also allow for more in-depth discussions among participants between meetings.

As in other countries, they also combine video and group training, such as participating in group training after viewing video lecture materials in advance. VR is sometimes utilized. Various EdTech that utilize technology are increasingly being used. Diversity in human resource development methods is increasing.

In the future, we are likely to see further diversification of training methods for human resource development within companies, as well as a trial-and-error approach to combining the various diversified methods.

Once various means of training are created, it will be important to measure and grasp the effectiveness of such means, while identifying the better ones.

The optimal use of each method will become clear based on the characteristics of each educational method.

Use of external educational environment

With the advancement of science and technology, such as the promotion of IT (application) and DX, and the introduction of such technology into corporate activities, members may need to acquire knowledge and skills that their seniors and managers in the workplace do not know. In this case, a large company may be able to provide an educational environment for its employees to acquire new knowledge that their seniors and managers do not know. However, not all companies are able to provide their employees with sufficient educational environment to acquire the new knowledge required by such changes in the environment.

In this case, they will have to make use of educational environments outside of the company, such as schools.

Compared to the past, employees will not only need to focus on on-the-job training in the workplace, but they will also need to develop their skills while acquiring learning opportunities outside the company.

Managers are increasingly expected to cooperate with their subordinates to help them develop their skills, while also taking into account corporate strategies and career development of their subordinates.

Learning on the side jobs and dual employment

In addition, side jobs and dual employment are becoming more common in Japanese society these days. We have also seen people developing their own skills through side or dual jobs. Through these side jobs and dual jobs, people can develop their abilities while gaining a variety of information through work experience outside of their own company.

Conclusion: Taking into account the culture of the organization

Earlier in this paper, I mentioned that, in general, it is important to increase employee proactivity toward career development within Japanese companies. On the other hand, there is a general decline in the motivation of members, as indicated by the results of workplace activities assessment, and as seen in the results of the abilities assessment of young employees, the ability to envision what they want to be in the future is not high among employees in their 20s. Also included among the managers are people in their 40s and 50s, who themselves have not been so proactive about career development. This means that it will be necessary for everyone to take more proactive steps toward career development, no matter what age group, whether members or managers, and throughout the company as a whole. One of the most important factors may be to create an atmosphere and culture in which employees take the initiative in their career development.

To this end, it will be important for the leaders of each company to take action and fulfill their roles. This may be related to what I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, that human capital management is becoming more and more important in Japan.

Over the next few years, a variety of human resource development methods will be diversified and different approaches will be tested.

In a changing environment, human resource development in Japanese companies is now entering a new era.

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