

## **Transitioning from international student to company employee in Japan**

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#### **Abstract**

Japan is one of the popular destinations for higher education due to its world's best ranking universities, safety, accessibility, and high quality of life. Although the number of international students in Japan has plummeted during the pandemic, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has announced to step up efforts to bring in more international students. The number of international students is bound to increase post pandemic. However, getting a job in Japan after graduation is still not easy. This article sheds light on different aspects that can help with the transition from being an international student to a company employee in Japan.

#### **1. Importance of the Japanese language**

Whether you plan to get your degree and return to your home country or work in Japan after completing your education, learning Japanese language will certainly help you. The knowledge of the Japanese language will make your life easier and improve your overall quality of life. Learning Japanese has helped me communicate with people in the neighborhood and join community matsuri (before the pandemic) which has increased my life satisfaction. More importantly, from the professional perspective, to work in the field of civil engineering, your ability to learn as well as contribute will be determined by your language ability. Knowledge of the Japanese language is very important for career growth. The language ability will not only help you excel in your career but can also help you make meaningful friends and understand the Japanese business style. Unfortunately, many international students find it difficult to learn the language, and as a result, most students end up not learning the language. International students tend to live in a bubble during the student years where English proficiency is more than enough to survive daily life and get education. Some of the reasons international students find it difficult to learn Japanese could be because 1) Japanese is a difficult language to learn, 2) most international students enroll for international programs where Japanese language isn't required; so even if student's learn the language, they won't have many opportunities to practice it, and 3) international students tend to get surrounded in an environment where Japanese friends and colleagues would instead want to practice English language with them instead of speaking in Japanese.

## **2. How is graduate-level education perceived by the industry?**

The educational environment in Japan is different, at least from my home country Nepal, which is why I encourage international students to do prior research before pursuing graduate and postgraduate degrees if they want to work in Japan after graduation. In Japan, you hear stories of people working in a field that is completely different from their academic major which is uncommon in my country. Generally, international students after completing their master's and doctorate tend to expect a job where they can utilize their academic knowledge while also getting higher remuneration. However, unless you are attempting to work in an academic or research institution or a company that has a dedicated research division, your doctoral degree won't be of much value both in terms of remuneration and the nature of your work. Therefore, prior research to understand the Japanese work culture, business system, and market demand is essential for those aspiring to work in Japan.

## **3. Issues in the educational environment**

The typical length of a master's course in Japan is 2 years where students dedicate the first year to lectures and the second year to research. Within these two years, students start the unique job-hunting process which typically takes about a year from the start of the application to getting a job offer. I was quite surprised when I learned that the students start the job-hunting process long before their graduation which isn't the case in most countries. The job-hunting process is indeed complicated, tedious and demands time and dedication. Figure 1 shows the hurdles faced by international students during job hunting. In my student years, I found that most Japanese students would focus more on the job-hunting process than their research. International students on the contrary, tend to focus more on research; as a result, most international students are either unaware of the job-hunting process or find it to be complicated and overwhelming. Moreover, there is a huge gap between what students learn in school and what they are expected to do in companies, which could be why many fresh graduates spend at least a year as trainees when they start their first job. In my personal experience doing job hunting in Japan, I got rejected by many companies. The rejections from civil engineering related consulting companies could be attributed to gender and lack of Japanese language ability among others. Companies did not care about knowledge learnt through curriculum at the university, academic publications, technical skill, writing skill, communication skill, or awards. Table 1 supports my statement to a great extent.

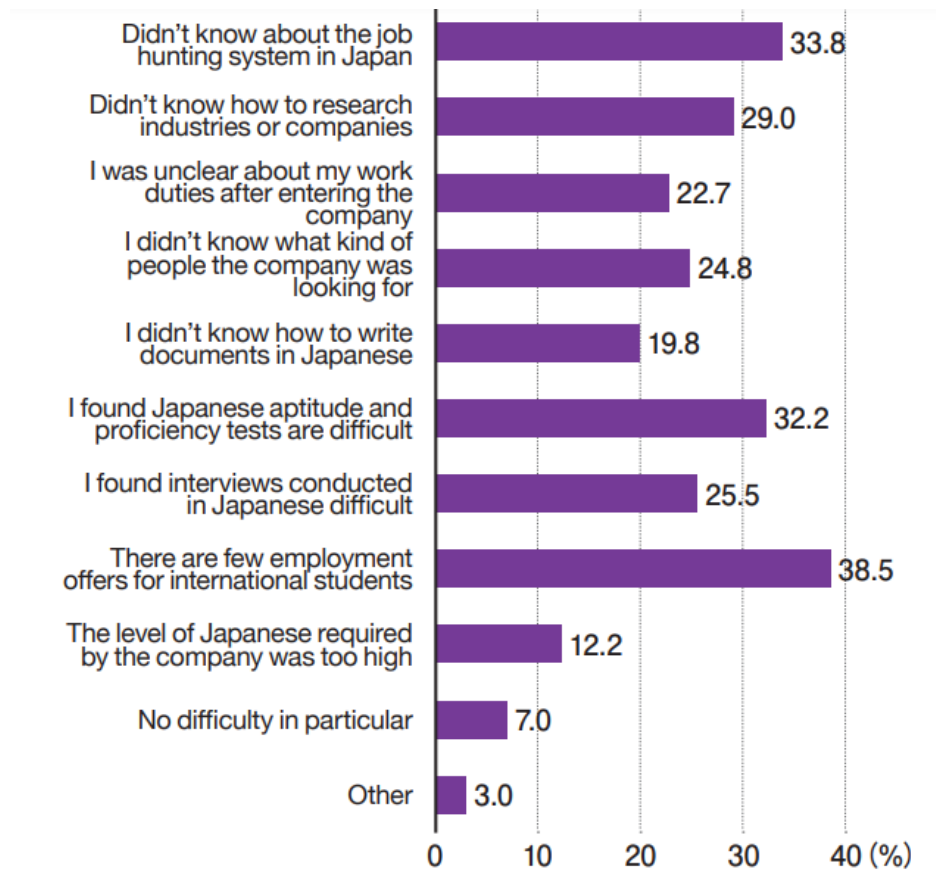


Figure 1: Hurdles faced by international students during job hunting in Japan (Source: JASSO, 2023)

Table 1: Skills/traits considered important by employers when hiring international students (Source: JASSO, 2023)

Skill/Trait	Manufacturing industry (%)	Nonmanufacturing Industry (%)
Japanese language skills	64.8	75.7
Communication skills	55.2	65.4
Vitality	41.9	33.6
Enthusiasm	28.6	29.0
Specialization	26.7	22.4
English language skills	19.0	11.2
Imagination	14.3	14.0
Leadership	9.5	7.5
University one attended	4.8	3.7
University academic record	1.9	1.9

#### **4. Scope for international students to work in civil engineering-related companies in Japan**

From the civil engineering point of view, Japan itself is a nearly saturated market when it comes to new infrastructure development. However, there are business opportunities for Japan to contribute to the infrastructure development in underdeveloped and developing countries worldwide. This is where international students become valuable. International students can act as a bridge between Japan and other countries to foster technology and knowledge transfer which can be a win-win situation for everyone involved.

#### **5. Summary and conclusion**

Moving forward, the number of international students in Japan will most likely increase but getting a job in Japan after graduation is not easy as evidenced by the low rate of employment of foreign students compared to Japanese students (Nikkei Asia, 2022). Given the labor shortage and declining population, a thorough understanding of what it means to have international students in Japan at this time and age is necessary. It is important to discuss on a national level, whether Japan wants to retain international students after their graduation.

In a homogeneous country like Japan, international students bring diversity which can be difficult to manage with conventional practices. Therefore, an understanding of diversity especially in the workplace is vital for the success of Japanese companies in the long run. For Japan to be a truly global destination for international students, an inclusive environment where diversity can flourish is essential. Workplace diversity has been linked to greater profits, better creativity, smarter decision-making, and a reduced rate of employee turnover. To address language barriers, international students should be encouraged to learn the Japanese language through the combined efforts of international students, locals, companies, academic institutions, and the government.

Currently, there are more universities that offer international courses than companies that accept international students which could be one of the reasons behind the low employment rate of international students. Academic institutions should focus on developing curricula targeted at international students by providing courses where they can learn the Japanese language, job-hunting process, business culture, and etiquette to adapt to Japanese work culture. Furthermore, collaboration between companies and academic institutions to provide internships can help smoothen the transition from academic institutions to companies, manage expectations and minimize the time required for training fresh graduates. Making internships mandatory can be one good alternative.

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Note that this article is the manuscript submitted by the author. The article is translated to Japanese and edited by JSCE Magazine editorial team under the supervision of the author

JSCE 2023 Article

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and published as part of a special feature, "Panoramic perspective of Japan's civil engineering community," in the January 2023 issue of JSCE Magazine.

Maharajan, R.: Transitioning from international student to company employee in Japan, JSCE Magazine, Vol. 108, No. 1, 2023. (in Japanese)

マハルジャン ラジャリ：留学生が日本で働けるように，土木学会誌，第 108 巻，第 1 号，2013.