

## COUNTERPOINT

## Japanese betray some blinkered views of their foreign coworkers

By ROGER PULVERS

On June 6, the Nihon Keizai Shimbun newspaper ran a feature on Japanese people's attitudes to non-Japanese colleagues at their places of work. The article included the results of a survey that explored those attitudes.

That survey illustrates some vital points about the way the Japanese relate to people of other nationalities living and working in Japan in 2010. But, before I get to these, let's look at the figures.

Of the firms polled in the wide-ranging survey, 34 percent reported having non-Japanese employees. The Japanese employees of those companies were asked: Do you consider the presence of non-Japanese employees a positive or a negative element for yourself?

Two percent responded "entirely positive"; 8 percent, "overwhelmingly positive"; 35 percent, "slightly more positive than negative"; 43 percent, "half and half"; 8 percent, "slightly more negative than positive"; 2 percent, "overwhelmingly negative"; and 2 percent, "entirely negative."

This indicates that nearly 90 percent of the Japanese consider the presence of non-Japanese coworkers to be, to one degree or another, a plus for them in their own work.

Positive elements cited by those surveyed included increases in energy levels in the company, openness to change, clarification of professional matters that Japanese workers didn't understand, boosted foreign-language skills and facilitation of dealings with companies overseas. But the telling part of the survey is revealed when you look at the reasons given by those Japanese who viewed the presence of non-Japanese coworkers as a liability.

Fifty percent of them gave this as their reason: the inability to have Japanese- style *ishindenshin* communication.

"Ishindenshin" is a term used often by Japanese people to describe nonverbal communication, the kind of quasitelepathic mutual understanding that they see as existing between Japanese people. Nearly 40 percent cited an unsatisfactory level of Japanese- language skills as their reason for having negative feelings. Twenty percent found non-Japanese people too self-assertive, while others mentioned that they seem to resist learning about Japanese customs. Some Japanese just felt uncomfortable and nervous in their presence.

Bearing in mind that the majority of Japanese were quite at home with people of other nationalities sharing their work space, it is the negative sentiments that may be notable when it comes to analyzing where, exactly, the Japanese stand today regarding their attitudes toward non-Japanese.

In taking a closer look at these negative sentiments, it is also important not to dismiss them out of hand as groundless. It may very well be true that a certain proportion of non-Japanese employees do in fact resist, or view with disdain, any number of Japanese customs — particularly those practiced in the workplace.

What I am intrigued by in all this is the social conditions prevailing in Japan, and how they affect the psychology of the Japanese today.

Is there really such a thing as *ishindenshin*? Of course there is, and it is present in every society on Earth in the way people look at each other and go through a variety of nonverbal gestures peculiar to their nationality, ethnicity or shared cultural background.

The Japanese are predominantly reticent — that is, they put a premium on verbal economy. There has generally been a belief here that people's understanding of you and your position does not rely on verbose logical explanation. In many other societies the opposite is the case: If you can't explain yourself and your motives in well- reasoned words and explanations, you run the risk of being, at best, misunderstood and, at worst, marginalized.

As for the ability of non-Japanese to use the Japanese language at a sufficient level to carry out the duties of employment, the Japanese in the companies themselves

would be the best judges of whether this was up to the mark or not. Certainly, the level is much higher today than it has been in the past. Years ago, some Japanese firms assiduously avoided hiring non-Japanese who spoke the language because "they could find out too much." Those days are thankfully over.

Are non-Japanese workers too self-assertive? Self-assertion is equally in the eye of the beholder as in the mouth of the supposedly self-assertive individual. These non-Japanese are no doubt appearing to Japanese eyes and ears as overly self-assertive.

As for the Japanese customs that are being resisted, what customs, I wonder, are these? For sure they wouldn't refer to things like the tea ceremony and visits to shrines on holidays, but rather to the ways in which Japanese people conduct business, both formally and informally, in and outside the workplace.

So, what's going on here in the air that both Japanese and non-Japanese are breathing at their companies?

There is the belief in Japan that non-Japanese who have chosen to live and work here should be expected to come over 100 percent to the Japanese side, to obey the codes of Japanese decorum and propriety that are quite demanding in this country, even to native Japanese. And yet, Japanese people generally do very little to help non-Japanese assimilate. Perhaps they believe it is not really possible in the first place for a non-Japanese person to be "like a Japanese." Perhaps they entertain a myth of their own recalcitrant peculiarity in order to feel somehow "special" among nationalities. Or perhaps, as with a small percentage of people surveyed, they are just on edge in the presence of non-Japanese and don't know how to deal with them.

Whatever the reason, it is a fact that Japanese people are not meeting non-Japanese halfway, taking their hand and systematically teaching them about Japanese codes of behavior intrinsic to this society and its smooth working. This goes for the language as well. Do companies offer language courses to their non-Japanese employees? Do migrants to this country, whatever the nature of their work might be, get sent to language-training courses? Anyone moving to Japan and working here should have available to them free language tuition for at least six months.

And the Japanese should learn to be more tolerant of non-Japanese forms of verbal and nonverbal expression. Many non-Japanese people sound strongly self-assertive when speaking Japanese because they lack the language skills to introduce subtlety and modesty into their speech. They may not be more self-assertive than Japanese people; they may only come across as such.

The Japanese are naturally wary of non-Japanese coming into their workplaces or schools or communities and riding roughshod over their customs, particularly if it disturbs the enviable civic harmony and safety of Japan. But they should be much more proactive in reaching out to non-Japanese in their midst, helping them to understand and appreciate Japanese ways. Maybe then, a little look or gesture will suffice to form a bond.

The Japanese have no monopoly on ishindenshin. Discovering that may help them gain confidence when living and working side by side with people of other nationalities. And it may also go a long way to making this society a more open and tolerant one for all of us.

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