

The Land of the Rising Sun

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Japan, the worlds' second largest economy for long, is characterized by industries that underline this status, be it consumer electronics, automotive or even industrial/engineering products. As a highly hierarchical and regulated society with strict rules for almost everything, Japan [Images] ranks #1 in most industry sectors for its clinical efficiency and quality.

In the recent past, there has been growing bilateral trade between India and Japan, which has historically been lower than what one would expect between two of the largest economies in Asia.

Just the last two to three years have seen several Japanese companies making forays to India to set up manufacturing bases in the country and tap into its large market, even as they also look at companies in India to provide specialized services.

While names such as Suzuki, Toyota, Honda, Sony, Mitsubishi, Matsushita and Panasonic have become household names in India over the years, it is heartening to see the increasing presence and growing familiarity with corporations like Mitsui, Itochu and Sumitomo amongst others.

Need for alternative markets

While the flavour of the day for a large number of young Indian professionals still seems to be a job with the prized H1B visa to the West or East Coast of the US, increasingly many career-minded executives view the US as a "crowded" market leading to reduced differentiation amongst peers. This in turn means increased competition during the job hunt, high-pressure jobs, performance-based compensation packages or reduced opportunities for coveted slots!

A shrewd career strategist looks for differentiated markets where there is less competition and higher barrier for entry. That is where Japan scores as a good destination for those interested in working overseas.

With an ageing workforce, increased openness (as opposed to insular ideas earlier) and positive inclination towards India-centric outsourcing, things have never looked better -- Japan is now becoming a land of rising opportunities for people who love challenges.

Professional skills required and job opportunities

Achieving success in the Japan market requires two key skills in addition to competence in your chosen field:

1. Good proficiency in Japanese language, and
2. A very good understanding and appreciation of its business culture

Before I begin with the kind of opportunities that are opening up for Indian professionals in the Indo-Japan sector, it will be pertinent to look at the development of opportunities for Indian talent in the US.

Contrary to popular perceptions, the present day boom in US did not start in the last five or so years. It started way back in the mid '80s when many economic immigrants left for the US, mainly to complete their Masters' degree programs. Subsequently, many of them settled down there imbibing the work culture, business ethics and the American way of thinking.

The successful ones climbed the corporate ladders of their companies and found themselves being handpicked for plum assignments under the career and succession planning strategies of their respective organizations. Since 2001, when the Indian economy started to boom, many of these American companies wanted a "trusted" person to start operations in the country. Which better person to turn to than someone who is "bicultural" ie a trusted and successful "insider" of Indian origin who is comfortable with both the worlds?

I am seeing something similar happening with Japan. I know of colleagues who have worked with Japanese companies for the last 10 years or more who were sent in as CEOs when the parent company in Japan decided to open its Indian operations. Herein lies the cue for all aspiring professionals. With bilateral trade with Japan poised to really take off, the time is ripe for such opportunities for future business leaders in this sector.

High demand for IT and finance professionals

The most visible roles are those that deliver the following value to businesses in both Japan and India:

1. A very good idea of the Indian market coupled with an ability to "interpret" opportunities for the Japanese management
2. A thorough understanding of the Japanese mindset to be able to deliver on the opportunities

"Lighthouse" roles such as account managers, relationship managers and project managers provide scope for demonstrating immense intellectual creativity and also a commensurately high remuneration. Other roles in this genre would be in marketing, sales, pre-sales and related business development functions.

In my experience, chartered accountants and software engineers have found extremely satisfying roles. With 2 to 5 years of experience, CAs today have plenty of opportunities in JSOX (Japan's version of Sarbanes-Oxley compliance regulations) projects with roles requiring good communication skills.

In fact, based on a recent "Japanisation" project (the process of making professionals ready to live and work in Japan) that we delivered for a leading accounting firm, this market can easily absorb at least 1,000 foreign accounting professionals next year, if not more.

Indian software engineers are in great demand all over the world and Japan is no

exception. Nihongo Bashi estimates that there are currently over 5,000 fully bilingual professionals in this sector in Japan today, which is growing at more than 100 per cent every year. Demand is huge in generic skills such as Java, C++, and embedded technologies as well as high-end skills such as SAP, Oracle, Mainframe technologies and the like.

Having "Japanised" over 3,000 professionals in both the fields, we have seen extremely satisfying results for the people taking on these opportunities in Japan.

According to some JETRO estimates, Japan needs about 300,000 foreign IT professionals across all industries due to strong demand. India currently has about 2 per cent of Japan's outsourcing business in IT/ITES and this is only likely to grow as fear and anxiety looms large over prospects of business in the US due to sub-prime issues and the forthcoming election year. The visa regime in Japan is a lot friendlier and flexible to Indian professionals and sans the "lottery" system prevalent in H1B process for the US market.

Other major industry segments that can provide interesting careers to professionals include automotive, biotechnology, pharmaceutical, food and heavy machinery.

Typical salaries

It would be very difficult to provide a comprehensive listing of salaries in Japan for all sectors here. Suffice to say that salary levels in Japan are almost at par with the US salaries, given the inherent strength of the Japanese Yen (1 USD = 114 JPY today).

This means a USD 3,000 monthly salary for an entry-level software engineer would be equal to 342,000JPY. Entry-level chartered accountants can command much higher salaries as the demand is more acute and supply extremely short.

Standard and cost of living

Being a first world country that has a developed economy, the standard of living is very good. At the same time, the cost of living is equally expensive when compared to the US.

However, one of the key aspects that sets Japan apart from the US is its highly sophisticated public transportation system unlike the US where personal transportation is a must. A complex network of train systems ferries commuters across the entire stretch of its mega metros like Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya and other larger cities. For example, it is not uncommon for senior executives at companies to hop on to a train for a meeting and travel 20 to 30 minutes across Tokyo. This is an important point to note for traveling and working Indians.

Karthik Tirupathi is President of Nihongo Bashi (www.nihongobashi.com), a Singapore-headquartered linguistic services company and one of the leading providers of Japanese language, management and culture training in India. The company offers an Academic Japanisation Program at its various centers across the country and in association with reputed engineering institutions. It also offers a full-time post graduate program in Japanese management.