

## Careers: Living and working in Japan

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In part 1 of this feature, we explored the emerging career opportunities in Japan for Indian professionals. In this piece, I shall touch upon some important considerations once one has landed that job / posting to Japan [Images]. A good understanding of life and work culture of the country will help professionals stay in good stead.

Being a highly heterogeneous society, with an equitable distribution of wealth, the average Japanese considers it unnecessary to flash his/her wealth. For example, as I mentioned yesterday, it is very common for senior executives to take the public transport -- there is no question of pride involved, unlike India where senior executives are expected to be seen in a chauffeur-driven car.

The point is that the Japanese are less ostentatious, even though they are not averse to spending money. Indeed, it is quite common for them to take overseas vacations to exotic destinations where they spend freely.

### Work culture

As a globalizing workforce, Indian talent needs to understand the distinct cultural milieu that exists in Japan, particularly in light of the recent shifts in mindset. Japanese society is very hierarchical and seniors usually command a lot of respect in addition to authority within the office. As a result, it is unlikely that subordinates would leave the office until the boss leaves. In fact, it is not unusual to find people working until 8 or 9 pm in the office.

At the same time, employment in a Japanese company has traditionally been for life, even in private sector companies. People mostly retire from the same company that they joined after their graduation. In return for this loyalty, companies reward employees with an unwritten "social and employment" contract. This is quite similar to traditional family-run Indian companies where seniority and loyalty are most highly prized.

The advent of the dot com era and the IT/ITES business has changed this a wee bit, but most Japanese employees and companies tend to have a highly trusted and long-lasting relationship. In many ways, this is very antithetical to the work environment in western countries where "hire by day and fire by night" tends to be a commonly accepted practice.

Extreme punctuality is another attribute that Indian professionals would need to get used to. Being on time, every time is absolutely critical. The Japanese philosophy is to place a lot of reliance on "WA" or harmony with nature and your surroundings. Hence differences, if any, will always be resolved in private, be it official or personal.

A highly team-oriented approach to work ensures that no one argues with bosses in open office meetings but instead tend to work out their differences with colleagues and bosses over informal discussions in the evening. This is usually done over dinner and the ubiquitous rice wine or sake (pronounced saa-kay).

Another aspect to remember is that the Japanese attach considerable importance to one's attire. Most Japanese are sharp dressers and impeccably dressed (in suits) without being flashy. So, if one is to make a favorable impression early, be sure to be smartly dressed.

**Loyalty to the organization** On account of the outsourcing boom from the US, young Indian professionals are greatly influenced by American work culture today. Frequent job changes / job-hopping by employees is quite common, even as organizations are constantly looking at "rightsizing".

Since employment with a Japanese company is usually for "life" even if not stated in employment contracts, most Japanese companies and executives find it quite frustrating to understand why Indian professionals change jobs so often or leave midway during projects. In this highly networked society and within industry circles, word about "bad behavior" can get around pretty fast and make further job opportunities hard to come by.

It is therefore quite important to develop an ability to balance personal and company objectives. Professionals who do decide to move on must ensure it is done in the best possible manner so as not to burn bridges, something that applies universally.

**Social norms: understanding public and private "face"** The Japanese society has a strong sense of public "face" and a private "face". Privacy is usually protected at all costs unlike in India where office colleagues are often acquainted with each other's family members.

Consequently, an invitation to come home for dinner from a Japanese colleague is an act that seeks to convey one of the highest forms of trust and faith in the relationship and should never be turned down.

As trust and relationships form the core of professional and personal relationships, new business relationships happen at a glacial pace. Almost all relationships are for the longer term and quite remunerative after the first few transactions -- quite akin to running a marathon as opposed to a sprint! This is in stark contrast with western business concepts where speed is of essence.

#### Adjustments to the palate

Getting the food one loves or can begin to like plays an important role in helping a person adjust and enjoy the place he/she has moved to. For most vegetarians, food could pose some initial challenges but one can certainly adapt reasonably quickly, as can be seen by the growing number of Indians in Japan.

With a good understanding of Japanese cuisine, it will eventually become easier to select and order vegetarian items in restaurants. Moreover, the demand for certain types of food with the rising population of Indian professionals in the country is slowly being met.

The world-renowned Japanese cuisine is mostly healthy and usually not deep-fried. The main items are either sticky rice or noodles. Traditionally, the cuisine has included fish / seafood to a large extent. Meat dishes becoming a part of traditional Japanese cuisine is a relatively recent development.

Examples of typical Japanese vegetarian dishes would be tofu (soya bean curd)-based dishes, cucumber sushi, rice cakes, okonomiyaki pancakes, tempura dishes featuring fried

vegetables. Shojin-ryori, or temple cuisine, is vegan by tradition, using mushrooms and excludes all meat and fish products. "Curry rice" is the one of the most sought after Japanese dishes, but be warned – it generally contains pork!

Of course, one can always go to a McDonald's, Subway or a 7-11 convenience store for some simple vegetarian dishes. It's a matter of getting used to a different vegetarian taste, similar to getting used to pasta or Chinese vegetarian food!

From my own experience, most Japanese hosts are very considerate and will understand the need for a vegetarian request. Usually, they will go to a great deal of trouble to ensure that such requests are strictly adhered to.

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