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## SOCIOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Does doing things the Japanese way attract highly-skilled migrants?

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**Abstract:** Like many global north countries, Japan has a rapidly aging and declining population. In order to maintain the size of its workforce as well as remain globally competitive, Japan needs to attract highly-skilled migrants. However, studies have shown that these migrants are dissatisfied with living and working in Japan in many ways. This paper focuses on two items on the list: Japanese-style human resource management (HRM) and the lack of use of English. This paper also identifies the predominance of Japanese-style HRM and lack of use of English as further manifestations of Japanese exclusionism and discusses them as such. Japanese-style HRM, which is characterised by long-term employment, seniority-based earnings and promotion, and teamwork orientation, among others, stands in sharp contrast to global standards in HRM. In addition, Japanese is the working language in the vast majority of companies. Unless Japan deals with these issues, it would not be able to compete with other global north countries for highly-skilled migrants on an equal footing.

**Subjects:** Anthropology - Soc Sci; Social & Cultural Anthropology; Globalisation; Sociology & Social Policy

**Keywords:** Japan; highly-skilled migrants; human resource management; English

### 1. Introduction

Like many other global north countries, Japan has a rapidly aging and declining population. With a median age of 46 years and life expectancy of 85 years, Japan has one of the oldest populations in the world (Sekiguchi, Froese, & Iguchi, 2016). In the 2015 Population Census (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2016), the total population stood at 126,933,000, which was 162,000 down from the previous year. The total population had been decreasing for the sixth year in a row. In 2016, the aged population (65 and above) was 34.59 million, constituting 27.3 percent of the total population and a record

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Liang Morita trained in Sociolinguistics in Britain. Upon completion of her studies, she taught in Thailand and worked on the Thai Chinese community. She has been living in Japan since 2003. She teaches in Nagoya University and her research interests include English in Japan, immigration, discrimination, and Japanese exclusionism, among others.

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This paper discusses issues which directly impact the daily life of many Japanese and non-Japanese living in Japan, such as the international survival and competitiveness of Japan, its workforce, human resource management practices at the workplace, and the use of English. Japan's international competitiveness depends on whether it can attract highly-skilled migrants and diversify its workforce. At the moment, Japan is not an attractive destination for highly-skilled migrants because of Japanese-style human resource management practices and the lack of use of English.

high. The productive-age population (15–64 years) was 76.56 million, which was 60.3 percent of the total population, and had been in decline since 1993 (The Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2017).

Some measures have been introduced to counteract the negative effects of the aging and declining population, but have been ineffective (D'Costa, 2013). One such measure is encouraging women to go back to work after getting married or having children, but some have pointed out that unless attitudes (such as “men should dominate” and “the rightful place of a woman is the home”) change, women are not returning to the workplace en masse anytime in the foreseeable future. Other measures include delaying the retirement age, automation in industry, and the use of robots in caring for the elderly, which all have their limitations. The only viable option left is immigration.

In addition to alleviating the negative effects of the aging and declining population as well as the labour shortage, encouraging immigration, especially highly-skilled migrants,<sup>1</sup> would also help Japan internationalise, serve its foreign customers better, and remain competitive in the global market. The Japanese market has been saturated, and large corporations such as Sony, Canon, Nissan and Shiseido generate most of their sales outside Japan. Their overseas sales ratios are 72, 81, 80 and 51 percent respectively (Sekiguchi et al., 2016). The presence of highly-skilled migrants in the workforce would help Japanese corporations tailor their products to the demands of foreign markets and remain competitive. The importance of the role played by highly-skilled migrants in the workforce should not be underestimated. The information and communication technology (ICT) serves as an example here. The analysis in Fukao, Ikeuchi, Kim, & Kwon (2016) shows that Japan was left behind in the recent ICT revolution, at least partly due to the lack of ICT specialists. This shortage of human resources could have been alleviated by foreign ICT specialists.

There are highly-skilled migrants in the workforce at present, although in relatively low numbers compared to other economic giants such as the US or Germany, or elsewhere in Asia such as Singapore or Hong Kong. Current numbers are also insufficient to counteract the negative effects of the aging and declining population. These migrants' dissatisfaction with life and work in Japan has been studied by D'Costa (2013) and Oishi (2012, 2013). D'Costa (2013) analysed why Indian information technology (IT) professionals preferred working in English-speaking countries and other OECD countries rather than Japan. The reasons were language and cultural barriers, the lack of English language usage, the unfamiliar social and business environment, the lack of national receptivity towards foreigners, and the lack of affordable international schools.

Oishi (2012, 2013) set out to account for the low numbers of highly-skilled migrants working in science and engineering in Japan. Her respondents in the Tokyo Metropolitan Area commented that starting salaries in Japan were relatively low compared to other countries. This is due to the practice of starting Japanese employees low on the salary scale, and then gradually increasing their salaries with seniority-based earnings. Long working hours and the lack of work-life balance also discouraged highly-skilled migrants. They were concerned about integration barriers at the workplace and female respondents were concerned about the low status of women at the workplace. The decision-making process involved in employees' promotion did not seem to be transparent to highly-skilled migrants. Furthermore, Japanese work practices can be unique, which means that the skills and knowledge acquired in Japan may not be transferable to other countries. This slows down highly-skilled migrants' career development. Ageism and the preference for fresh graduates in the Japanese job market means it is difficult for highly-skilled migrants to change jobs within Japan. There are also other inconveniences such as the non-transferability of foreigners' pension contributions to their home country. Foreigners do receive a one-time compensation for their pension contributions when they leave Japan but it is set at an insufficient level. Many of the respondents were also dissatisfied with their children's education in Japan and the integration of family members into Japanese society.

When Oishi (2012, 2013) interviewed Japanese employers, she found that only a limited number, who were mostly large corporations, were willing to hire foreigners. Employers were concerned about foreigners' Japanese language skills and their ability to communicate in it. The vast majority of Japanese companies use Japanese, and only a very small minority adopt English as the working language. Employers were also concerned about high turnover rates among foreigners, because in contrast, Japanese employees typically stay with the same employer for many years and that justifies the high costs for training them. Foreigners, on the other hand, may leave soon in spite of the time and money invested in their training.

Similar observations have been made by other researchers. Employers are concerned that high turnover rates reflect a lack of commitment to the company (Mouer, 2015). Furthermore, it is customary for new employees to be trained, which consumes company time and money. This investment in employees is multiplied when foreign employees leave frequently. From the point of view of these employees, they are unhappy about the level of commitment demanded by the company, the long working hours, and the considerable power the management has in deciding when those hours will be scheduled (Mouer, 2015).

As we can see from above, the scope of the issues highly-skilled migrants are dissatisfied with is too broad for all of them to be discussed meaningfully in a paper. The present paper narrows the scope down to Japanese-style human resource management (HRM) and the lack of use of English, as well as identify these two keys factors in the dissatisfaction of highly-skilled migrants as manifestations of Japanese exclusionism (Morita, 2015).

Morita (2015) illustrated Japanese exclusionism with discrimination against foreigners in Japan and how the housing market is closed to foreigners. She defines Japanese exclusionism as an exclusionary attitude or opinion which often translates into the insistence that foreigners do things the Japanese way. This is illustrated by the following comment made by a Japanese respondent in relation to the provision of multilingual services for foreigners in Tokyo:

It's natural that foreigners who come to Japan should do things the Japanese way. It's strange that we provide special services for them. We should not give them any special treatment. Nagy (2012, p. 133)

According to the respondent above, foreigners should use the Japanese language in Japan and there is no need for local government offices to meet their linguistic needs.

The present paper identifies the predominance of Japanese-style HRM and lack of use of English as further manifestations of Japanese exclusionism, as part of the insistence on doing things the Japanese way, and discusses them as such. It is therefore not a mere review of literature on HRM and English. No one else seems to have looked at these factors from an exclusionary point of view. Most papers on Japanese HRM are written from a management perspective (such as Conrad & Meyer-Ohle, 2017; Sekiguchi et al., 2016) and papers on English from an education or sociolinguistic perspective (such as Kubota, 2011, 2015; Liddicoat, 2007, 2013). The objective and main argument of the present paper is to show that by insisting on doing things the Japanese way, namely in HRM and by not using English, Japan is diminishing its attraction as a destination for highly-skilled migrants.

The next section discusses the methodology, followed by Japanese-style HRM in Section 3, the lack of use of English in Section 4, and the experiences of nurses and care workers in the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) programme in Section 5. The discussion is presented in Section 6 and the conclusion in Section 7.

## 2. Methodology

The present study began when the author's interest was piqued as she observed a pattern in her reading on highly-skilled migrants in Japanese workplaces. The pattern pointed towards Japanese exclusionism similar to that described by Morita (2015). Both Japanese-style HRM and lack of use of English stood out as key factors in highly-skilled migrants' dissatisfaction. The next step was to gather more academic publications on Japanese-style HRM and English in Japan. The author used search engines such as Scopus, and used keywords such as "Japan HRM" and "Japan English". This yielded about 50 publications published in the past five years. There was no bias in the selection of publications, for example, a bias in favour of publications which are against Japanese-style HRM. The contents were studied carefully and confirmed Japanese-style HRM and lack of use of English as manifestations of Japanese exclusionism. The author then took extensive notes on the features of Japanese-style HRM, highly-skilled migrants' responses, English language education, and use of English in Japan, among others, of which this paper is the product.

The methodology could also be described as the documentary research method (McCulloch, 2004), with academic publications as the main source of documents. This method, which uses generated data using documents from the past and present, has a long-standing history in the social sciences. It is still relevant today, as it continues to evolve with hybrid and virtual documentary sources from the internet and email.

## 3. Japanese-style human resource management

There had been great interest in Japanese-style human resource management (HRM) because of Japan's tremendous economic growth from the post-war period to the early 1990s (Sekiguchi et al., 2016).<sup>2</sup> This style of HRM is characterised by long-term employment, seniority-based earnings and promotion and teamwork orientation, among others. However, due to the collapse of the bubble economy in the early 1990s, and Japan's resistance to adapting to the trends of the global economy from the 2000s, some researchers have lost their admiration for Japanese-style HRM (Maki, Ebisuya, & Sekiguchi, 2015; Oishi, 2012; Sekiguchi et al., 2016).

When companies which practice Japanese-style HRM hire, they usually hire fresh university graduates at entry level. The reasoning is that a new graduate is a piece of white cloth that can be dyed in any colour by the company. On the other hand, a person who has some work experience has already been dyed and it would be difficult to re-dye that piece of cloth (Conrad & Meyer-Ohle, 2017).<sup>3</sup> This preference for new graduates makes the job market inflexible in the sense that it is difficult for those who are older and with experience to find jobs or change jobs.

All new employees go through an orientation programme that introduces the company's history and philosophy as well as appropriate business conduct and manners. New employees are then assigned their departments and positions, although they continue to take part in regular training programmes. While some companies allow new employees to express their preference for their first departments and positions, most emphasise that employees are not hired for specific departments or positions and that companies have a free hand in deciding where to assign them (Conrad & Meyer-Ohle, 2017). New employees tend to be given positions in domestic sales as their first positions, which is where companies regard as the best place for them to become familiar with the core business. Throughout their career, employees are rotated through different positions and departments, which from the companies' point of view, develops the employee as well as gives the company flexibility in assigning employees. Salary and promotion are based on seniority. New employees' salaries are usually low, but they increase each year as they gain seniority (Sekiguchi et al., 2016).

Due to the fact that most employees do start their career and spend most of their working life at the same company, they possess intimate knowledge of the company. They know how things are done and what the unwritten rules are. This means that in daily company communication among coworkers, a lot of background information is taken for granted and not spelt out explicitly, which makes it difficult for newcomers who have not been socialised in the same way to understand and

participate. This is exacerbated by the fact that Japanese society is collectivist, which carries over to the workplace, and emphasises the group over the individual, as well as prioritises teamwork. Consensus-building, rather than decisions made by individuals, is the norm (Sekiguchi et al., 2016).

Traditional Japanese-style HRM is incompatible with global HRM trends (Sekiguchi et al., 2016). Highly-skilled migrants with no long-term plans to live in Japan are uninterested in seniority-based salary or promotion systems, or being rotated around the company. Many of them leave their jobs sooner compared to the Japanese as they become disappointed with Japanese-style HRM. If Japanese companies are serious about internationalising and hiring more highly-skilled migrants, it follows that they should make adjustments to Japanese-style HRM to accommodate these employees. There are signs that some corporations are changing their HRM practices but many are not (Sekiguchi et al., 2016). Many corporations insist on doing things the Japanese way. This observation is supported by Oishi (2012)<sup>4</sup> and Maki et al. (2015). Maki et al. noted that companies have not made changes to key HRM practices such as long-term training or job rotation in order to accommodate highly-skilled migrants. Rather than adjusting their HRM practices, companies carefully select highly-skilled migrants who are familiar with Japanese society, language, culture and HRM, and are therefore more likely to accept and adapt to Japanese-style HRM. Afterwards, these employees are socialised to become like Japanese employees and fit into their workplace. Sekiguchi et al. argue that these employees are more similar to the Japanese in their mindset and are not as effective for the internationalisation of the company. Due to the desire to maintain the harmony of the Japanese workplace and reluctance to deal with the inconvenience of other languages and cultures, companies have sacrificed the diversity of its workforce.<sup>5</sup> This ultimately compromises the process of internationalisation.

The practice of hiring non-Japanese who are familiar with Japan is also noted by Breaden (2014).<sup>6</sup> When it comes to hiring non-Japanese, many companies prefer non-Japanese graduates of Japanese universities, because these graduates have been socialised into a Japanese environment, are familiar with Japanese culture and society, and are competent in the Japanese language. In fact, companies prioritise spending time and energy in ensuring they select the right ones who will fit in well, over adjusting their HRM practices to accommodate them. Those who are selected are expected to fit into the workplace without inconveniencing anyone or having any adjustments made to accommodate them. However, even with these non-Japanese employees, companies are reluctant to commit to their employment in the long run. Employers cite cultural incompatibility as the reason for not wanting to hire them long-term (Breaden, 2014).

While Breaden's (2014) observations were based on the experiences of non-Japanese who graduated from Japanese universities, Conrad and Meyer-Ohle's (2017) study included both non-Japanese who graduated from Japanese universities and non-Japanese who graduated from universities outside Japan. Conrad and Meyer-Ohle found that although many companies have lowered the initial contact barriers by allowing online submission of job applications in English and by participating in specialised recruitment fairs abroad, the subsequent selection, socialisation and training processes are very much identical to those used for Japanese employees.

Other findings in Conrad and Meyer-Ohle's (2017) work include HR representatives' awareness of non-Japanese employees' discontent about the lack of job description, unclear evaluation standards, and the slow pace of career advancement. In spite of this awareness, HR representatives pointed out that core HRM practices such as broad job descriptions, generalist career paths, seniority-based salary, on-the-job training, and frequent job rotations, could not be changed just for non-Japanese employees. Since these practices are viewed as being set in stone, companies are trying to be more explicit about them during the hiring process in order to prepare potential non-Japanese employees and eliminate from the process those who cannot accept them. Most HR representatives in the study felt that non-Japanese employees' frustrations with Japanese-style HRM practices were due to their lack of understanding of the logic behind these practices. Some companies have adjusted their selection criteria to hire only non-Japanese they think will fit well into the workplace.

All in all, companies are interested in hiring highly-skilled migrants, but on their own terms. They are not prepared to modify Japanese-style HRM practices to suit non-Japanese employees and would rather search for those who are more likely to accept their HRM practices. This is clearly an insistence on doing things the Japanese way. It compromises the diversity of the workforce, since only a subset of highly-skilled migrants would accept those terms of employment.

#### 4. The lack of use of English<sup>7</sup>

The choice of working language at a workplace is an important issue which directly impacts employees' professionalism. In companies where Japanese is the working language, Japanese employees express themselves with ease, confidence and accuracy while non-Japanese employees struggle, are unable to express themselves well, and feel as if their ability to carry out their work effectively has been taken away (Fairbrother, 2015). The reverse is true in companies where the working language is English.

English has been the main language of globalisation for a few decades (Jenkins & Leung, 2014). Before that, English was spoken in Anglophone countries, post-colonial countries, and between native and non-native speakers. These days, the most extensive use of English is as a lingua franca among people who speak different first languages (Jenkins & Leung, 2014), which means it could be an extremely useful tool of communication for Japan. In international business, English is the global business language (Harzing & Pudelko, 2013; Neeley, 2013). In spite of this, many in Japan have not embraced English (Kubota, 2011, 2015), due to various reasons such as being unconvinced that English is necessary or fears that English will threaten Japanese. Writers such as Kubota (2011, 2015) have been downplaying the necessity of English, citing the fact that the largest groups of non-Japanese in Japan speak Chinese, Korean and Portuguese as their native languages and therefore these languages are of greater practical value than English (Morita, 2017b).

The vast majority of Japanese companies use mostly Japanese as the working language (Oishi, 2012, 2013). Only a very small minority adopt English. Since Japanese is not widely spoken outside Japan, this constitutes a language barrier for highly-skilled migrants. Many respondents in Oishi's study of highly-skilled migrants working in science and engineering cite this barrier for not wanting to work in Japan. When considering hiring highly-skilled migrants, employers are concerned about their Japanese language skills and their ability to communicate in it (Morita, 2017b; Oishi, 2012, 2013).

In a different study of engineers, Murata (2015) found that the lack of Japanese language skills is important from the point of view of the company because it adds to costs in the form of translation or interpretation fees. Non-Japanese engineers who do not speak Japanese are unable to interact directly with clients, which leads to communication difficulties and this costs clients more time and effort in dealing with the language barrier (Morita, 2017b).

A similar concern about Japanese skills was reported in by Murai (2015). A director at the career support centre at Waseda University said in an interview that employers expect non-Japanese students to speak native-level Japanese, which is a major hurdle for these students. Employers are concerned about minor slips in Japanese language use jeopardising client trust.

In general, Japanese companies are reluctant to hire non-Japanese who have limited Japanese proficiency (Murata, 2015). The irony is that in spite of this reluctance, there is increased demand for these highly-skilled migrants, especially in software engineering and executive management (Mouer, 2015). There is a pressing need to utilise non-Japanese talents and expertise more effectively, in the way English-capable businesses in China, India, Singapore and other countries in Asia are. These businesses are tapping into the pool of professionals trained by top universities and business schools in Europe and North America, while Japan, lacking the ability to provide an English-speaking workplace, is being left out (Morita, 2017b; Mouer, 2015).

To be fair, it has to be said that there have been efforts to introduce English to the workplace. For the Japanese, there is often an English language requirement in job applications in the form of a score on the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) (Sekiguchi et al., 2016). This test was developed in the late 1970s for the Japanese market, and tests mainly grammar and vocabulary, not communication skills. Japanese who have done well in English classes taught using the grammar-translation method (to be introduced below shortly) generally do well on the TOEIC. Japanese companies are increasingly requiring TOEIC scores for job applications and promotions (Sekiguchi et al., 2016). However, whether the TOEIC is an appropriate measure of English skills for the workplace is questionable, since working with highly-skilled migrants requires much more than English grammar and vocabulary.

There are two key reasons why English is not more widely used at work. The first is resistance to the use of English due to nationalistic reasons (Liddicoat, 2007, 2013), and the second, low standards of English because of the way it is taught (Morita, 2010).

Japanese nationalistic tendencies are best explained with the help of *Nihonjinron*, which literally means “theories of the Japanese”. *Nihonjinron* is a diverse genre of writing which discusses Japanese uniqueness (Sugimoto, 1999). It claims to identify the essence of Japaneseness. This type of writing has been very influential in how English and Japanese are perceived (Burgess, 2010). In *Nihonjinron*, the Japanese language is seen as an intrinsic part of being Japanese (Liddicoat, 2007). Being a Japanese person is equated to using the Japanese language and the Japanese language only. A Japanese person and the Japanese language are inseparable. It follows that Japanese people must use the Japanese language in the workplace (Morita, 2017a).

According to *Nihonjinron*, Japanese ethnicity, Japanese language and Japanese culture are extremely unique, and therefore the world does not understand Japan (Liddicoat, 2007, 2013). This line of reasoning has been manipulated by educators and policy-makers to achieve the goal of prioritising the Japanese language over English (Morita, 2017a). For these educators and policy-makers, English is important for expressing Japanese thoughts, ideas, values, attitudes, opinions, identity and points of view. This one-directional expression of Japaneseness through English has priority over engaging with others outside Japan (Liddicoat, 2007, 2013). Educators and policy-makers argue that because Japan is so unique and different from the rest of the world, it is frequently misunderstood. In order to rectify this situation, the Japanese need to use English to make themselves understood by the world. However, one needs to be able to discuss Japan in the Japanese language first before one can discuss Japan in English. This means that Japanese people must master the Japanese language before they learn English. Therefore, resources should be allocated to Japanese language learning before they are allocated to English. Time and energy spent on learning English should also be less than that spent on Japanese (Liddicoat, 2007, 2013; Morita, 2017a).

The second key reason why English isn't more widely used in the workplace is low standards of English due to the way it is taught (Morita, 2010). In Japanese classrooms, English is still being taught using the grammar-translation method (Rosenkjar, 2015; Stewart & Miyahara, 2011). In this method, the main classroom activity is laborious word-by-word translation of English texts into Japanese. The teacher provides explanations of English grammar, using Japanese. This method originated in the second half of the nineteenth-century, when Japan wanted to acquire knowledge from the West for its development. The method is still widely used in schools and universities (Rosenkjar, 2015; Stewart & Miyahara, 2011), neglecting the development of communicative competences, intercultural awareness and global perspectives (Whitised & Wright, 2011). This is why the average total score on TOEFL in 2015 is 71 for Japan, the second lowest in Asia. The lowest is the People's Democratic Republic of Lao at 66, while Singapore ranked highest at 97 (Education Testing Service, 2016). There have been attempts at introducing communication-based approaches from the 1980s, but with limited success (Morita, 2010, 2017a, 2017b).

In a survey of native speakers of English who teach part-time in Japanese universities, the respondents revealed that the norm in English language education was “appearance over substance” and universities were more concerned about “impression management” than the education of their students (Whitsed & Wright, 2011). Although there are English communication classes in universities, these classes give an impression of being modern but in reality lack substance. The availability of these classes satisfies the government, businesses, parents, and students, but in classrooms, teachers are not expected to teach in a way which maximises teaching outcomes. The teachers reported that universities were ambivalent about the development of communicative competences. In many cases, communication classes lacked coordination, were unstructured or not integrated into the wider curricula. Most teachers believed that learning outcomes were unimportant to the majority of universities. They felt that students did not see English as a living language, as something beyond a component of university entrance examinations (Morita, 2017a; Whitsed & Wright, 2011).

Japanese exclusionism, or the demand to do things the Japanese way, is clear throughout this discussion on the lack of use of English. It is clear from the demand to use the Japanese language at the workplace, from using the TOEIC (a test developed for the Japanese market) to screen Japanese job applicants, and from the use of the outdated grammar-translation method to teach English.

### 5. The experiences of nurses and care workers in the EPA programme

Strictly speaking, nurses and care workers are not regarded as highly-skilled migrants in Japan (see Note 1). However, they too, have experienced demands for their re-training and duties to be carried out in accordance to Japanese terms, and they have been inconvenienced by the lack of use of English. Their experiences at the Japanese workplace are well-documented and are instructive for those who are interested in the outcomes of Japanese exclusionism at the workplace.

The Economic Partnership Agreements (EPA) programme is the main channel for nurses and care workers to enter Japan. They enter Japan as participants in the EPA programme. Japan signed EPAs with the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam and India between 2006 and 2011 to facilitate the entry of nurses and care workers (Ford & Kawashima, 2016). Although fully-certified in their home countries, these professionals must work as assistants in Japan until they pass the Japanese national examination, in the Japanese language. When they arrive in Japan, their existing skills and knowledge are not fully acknowledged, and working as assistants regardless of their work status at home downgrades them and leads to gradual deskilling (Vogt, 2013). Although their salary will be on a par with Japanese co-workers once they pass the national examination, they are paid as assistants before they pass, which can take up to three years. This discrepancy exists even though they too are graduates of nursing schools. Even after a non-Japanese nurse has passed the national examination, a Japanese staff member must be on call whenever the non-Japanese is on duty (Morita, 2017a, 2017b; Vogt, 2013).

What stands out most in the experiences of these health professionals in the EPA programme is the hardship of passing the national examination (Shinohara, 2016). In 2015, the passing rate for Indonesian nurses was five percent (Shinohara, 2016). With efforts to make the examination more foreigner-friendly, the passing rate is improving (Akashi, 2014). *Kanji* (“Chinese characters”) in the examination is now supplemented with *furigana*, a less complex Japanese script, and the names of diseases are provided in both English and Japanese. Japanese expressions are simpler, and a longer test time is offered to foreign candidates. An Indonesian nurse Vogt (2013) interviewed failed the examination the first time she took it, and only passed it the second time because a Japanese doctor helped her study her medical vocabulary and 10 pages of medical writing, every evening for two hours for a year. Even after passing the examination, she did not find her job fulfilling, because she was bullied by Japanese nurses, who saw her as more of a burden than an equal co-worker. At the time of the interview, she was contemplating moving on to an English-speaking country (Morita, 2017a, 2017b).

In her study of Filipino nurses, Carlos (2014) painted her respondents as savvy migrants who compared the terms of employment and living conditions in different countries. Japan is ranked low in the list of destinations preferred by Filipino nurses and this suggests that Japan is losing out in the

global competition for nurses. Filipino nurses may come to Japan, but not for the long-term because the terms of employment are inferior compared to other countries. Japanese salary and benefits are lower than that in the US, Canada, and Australia. Filipino nurses also prefer a country which actively promotes multiculturalism, such as Australia. Concerning family reunification, Japanese employers do not allow nurses to bring family, not even immediate family. Furthermore, employers generally discourage long holidays. Candidate nurses are allowed only one to two weeks to visit the Philippines. As we have seen earlier, candidate nurses work very hard to pass the Japanese national examination. The irony is that the Japanese nursing licence may not be recognised anywhere else. Since the Japanese language is not widely spoken outside Japan, the language skills which have taken so much time and effort to acquire may be of little value too (Carlos, 2014).

## 6. Discussion

In May 2017, it was reported that Japan, which adopts its own standards for symbols, was reviewing about 90 public symbols in order to bring them in line with international standards (Sim, 2017). This is part of the preparation for the 2020 Olympic Games hosted by Tokyo. Most of the review went smoothly, except for the contentious *onsen* (“hot spring”) sign. The Japanese version has three wavy lines of steam rising out of a pool, while the international version has the silhouettes of three people in a bath. The concern was that the Japanese sign may mislead readers into thinking that it is a symbol for hot food or coffee. This became the subject of much heated debate. Traditionalists insist that the Japanese symbol has long been synonymous with the Japanese *onsen*. The executive director of an association of *ryokan* (“guest house”) owners remarked “It is like asking us to stop slurping our noodles in Japan. When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” Amid protests from traditionalists, the government has said that both Japanese and international symbols will be used (Sim, 2017).

Even if the traditionalists who demanded doing things the Japanese way won, it is hard to imagine serious economic consequences resulting from the choice of a symbol. With Japanese-style HRM and not using English, it is different. There will be grave consequences if Japan were to continue insisting on Japanese-style HRM and using Japanese at the workplace. Take for example the issue of seniority-based salaries. We have seen earlier that Japanese salaries start low and then gradually increase with seniority. As a result, Japanese salaries can seem lower when compared with salaries in other global north countries. In January 2017, it was reported that Japanese automakers, Toyota, Honda and Nissan, are losing out to Uber Technologies Inc. and Tesla Motors Inc. in terms of IT professional staff (Ma, 2017). Japan has had the most severe talent shortages in the world since 2010, with IT positions being among the top three hardest positions to fill. It was short of an estimated 171,000 IT staff members in 2016 and this may more than quadruple to 789,000 by 2030, according to a survey by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (Ma, 2017). This will no doubt have a serious economic impact.

Japan will lose much sought-after highly-skilled migrants to other global north countries if the demand to do things the Japanese way were to continue. Japanese-style HRM and not being able to use English at the workplace directly impact highly-skilled migrants’ ability to perform well at work, job satisfaction, career development, and earnings. We have seen in Section 4 that the choice of working language directly impacts employees’ professionalism. In Section 3, we saw how earnings and promotion are determined based on the assumption that employees will be hired on a long-term basis. Due to this assumption, salaries start relatively low in Japan. This differs from global HRM practices, as are seniority-based earnings and promotion. Earnings and promotion tend to be based on merit and performance elsewhere.

We saw in Section 5 the effects of Japanese exclusionism on nurses in the EPA programme. The nurses have to re-train and work in accordance to Japanese terms, as well as learn the Japanese language in order to pass the Japanese national examination. What nurses and highly-skilled migrants have in common is that they are both much sought-after in the world. Filipino nurses have responded to the unfavourable terms of employment in Japan by ranking it low in their list of destinations. Nurses’ salaries in Japan are lower than that elsewhere and preparation for the national

examination in the Japanese language requires a substantial investment in time and effort. This investment may not be fully rewarded since the Japanese nursing licence may not be recognised outside Japan and the Japanese language is not widely spoken elsewhere. Like these nurses, highly-skilled migrants are also savvy individuals who compare the costs and benefits of their migration destinations and seek to maximise their gains. Just as the nurses ranked the US, Canada and Australia above Japan, highly-skilled migrants also have other preferred destinations and may bypass Japan altogether.

## 7. Conclusion

The aging and declining population situation in Japan is acute, and there is a pressing need to forge ahead with diversifying the Japanese workforce in order to be internationally competitive. It is clear that Japanese corporations need to be flexible in their HRM, including modifying their HRM practices whenever necessary so that they are comparable to global standards. English needs to be more widely used at the workplace. Japanese leaders must assuage fears that the use of English makes Japanese people less Japanese, as well as emphasise the importance of English. In classrooms, modern alternatives to the grammar-translation method must be explored. Only then will Japan be able to compete with other global north countries on a more equal footing for highly-skilled migrants.

The present paper has relied heavily on accounts of Japanese workplaces provided in academic publications. This in itself may be a limitation. It is practically unheard of for researchers to be permitted to observe the day-to-day life in Japanese corporations, although this would be the richest form of data for researchers such as the present author. Efforts should be made to communicate to business leaders how important such data is, and perhaps in time, researchers would be welcome to observe.

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### Notes

1. There is no official definition of “highly-skilled migrant” in Japan. The Immigration Bureau of Japan issues employment visas based on occupations or work types, such as “engineer” or “investor/business manager”. Policy-makers and researchers often use 13 employment visa categories to define highly-skilled migrants: engineer, investor/business manager, intercompany transferee, professor, researcher, instructor, skilled labourer, legal and accounting services, religious activities, artist, and medical services (Oishi, 2012).
2. Sekiguchi et al. (2016) did not specify which industry their observations of Japanese-style HRM were based on.
3. Conrad and Meyer-Ohle’s (2017) observations of Japanese-style HRM are based on what they claim to be many of Japan’s best-known multinational enterprises from a wide range of sectors.
4. Oishi’s (2012) observations of Japanese-style HRM are based on the science and engineering industries.
5. A diverse workforce is a key to economic competitiveness and survival. As Oishi (2012) explained, due to the fact that the vast majority of Japanese corporations

are staffed by the Japanese and a very small number of non-Japanese, they tend to be inward-looking. These corporations focus on the domestic market and produce goods that tailor to Japanese consumers’ needs. Having a more diverse workforce would help Japanese corporations adopt a more international outlook and take into account the needs of consumers all over the world.

6. Breaden (2014) did not specify which industry his observations were based on.
7. There are similarities between this section and the section entitled English language education in Morita (2017b) because they are written by the same author. Despite the overlap in subject matter, the present section has been updated and rewritten, and includes references not used in Morita (2017b), namely: Burgess (2010), Fairbrother (2015), Harzing & Pudelko (2013), Liddicoat (2007, 2013), Murai (2015), Neeley (2013), Rosenkjar (2015), Sekiguchi et al. (2016), and Sugimoto (1999).

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