
Human Resource Development Initiatives in Large Japanese Companies: Coexistence of company-wide uniformity and individual response in the workplace

Japan, like other countries, is currently facing major environmental changes. Against this backdrop, companies are proceeding with corporate activities in an effort to successfully adapt to the new environment. This brief reports on some of the status of human resource development within Japanese companies in this context.

Company-wide level-specific education to date:

Many large Japanese companies have traditionally created and implemented a company-wide education system. Most company-wide education systems are designed to organize what kind of education to provide, to what level, and by what method.

The HR department, based on an understanding of the company-wide situation, establishes company-wide employee education issues and various themes necessary for the education of each level of employees. Education methods are then selected in line with each theme.

Level-specific education centered on such a company-wide training system has traditionally been implemented because it is seen as having several benefits, including:

1. Promoting the sharing of company-wide and departmental strategies

Share the strategy, the image of human resources required to realize the strategy, and company-wide efforts in human resource development.

2. Reform the organizational culture

Accelerate the creation of a corporate culture that nurtures people by promoting company-wide human resource development activities. Encourage the creation of an environment that promotes employee learning.

3. Improve employee performance

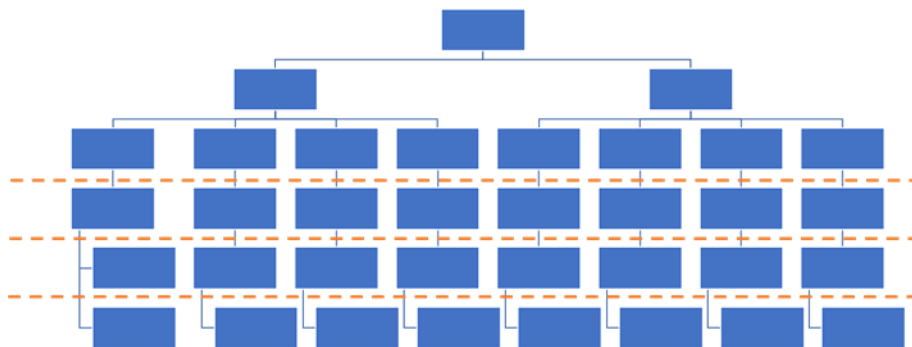
Improve problem-solving skills at each workplace, offer training by supervisors and employees, provide necessary support to young employees for their fast growth, and pass on know-how.

An important education program based on such a company-wide education system is the company-wide, level-specific training for each job level.

In the level-specific training, employees of the same level from across the company or from all divisions gather in a room, where training is conducted. For example, employees who are newly appointed to positions such as section chiefs or entry-level managers, or those who have been with the company for 10 years or other years, gather together to attend training sessions. The training has learning objectives for each level, and employees learn through

readings, exercises, discussions, and other activities. The training is designed to bring together employees from multiple professions, such as finance, sales, etc.

These level-specific training programs have also encouraged the creation of personal networks within the company that transcend divisions and job functions.



In many Japanese companies, company-wide initiatives for human resource development, such as level-specific training, have been regarded as important.

It is a company-wide effort to define the human resources that the organization seeks and to develop those human resources.

The impact of major changes in the environment on human resource development activities

The environment has changed significantly. One of the changes in the environment is the diversification of people working in the workplace within an organization. Japanese society is becoming increasingly diverse. The same is true of the workplaces within organizations. In addition, more and more people are changing jobs, and there are more and more situations where people with diverse expertise, diverse experience, and diverse values work together in the same workplace.

Second, the birthrate is declining and the population is aging. Due in part to the declining birthrate and aging population, there are fewer young people in traditional companies, and more people than ever before are experiencing staff shortages in the workplace.

The third is the expectation of digitalization: as the use of AI and the general use of online meeting systems with the Corona disaster have become more common, new ways of working are expected.

Fourth, more innovation is now required. There are more and more situations in which the conventional ways of working no longer work.

Under these new circumstances, several aspects of human resource development activities have become more important.

Strengthening the linkage between corporate strategies and human resource development strategies

What has become more important in company-wide human resource development activities is to better align corporate strategy with human resource development strategy.

Until now in Japan, it has been important to consider corporate strategy when thinking about human resource development strategy. However, some aspects of the environment surrounding companies are now changing more drastically than ever before. In addition, the speed of change is also increasing. This means that human resource development plans that respond to changes in corporate strategy need to be modified in a more flexible manner, without being restricted to the way things have been done in the past.

In addition, human resource development is a medium- to long-term strategy. In this case, it is important to look ahead and link it to the company's strategy so that it will produce results in the future. It is natural that results may not be achieved now or in the short term. It may take years to see results, but human resource development activities must be carried out from a medium- to long-term perspective in order to implement the corporate strategy.

To this end, HR managers need to work more closely with management and more proactively than ever before with key departments.

Up to this point, the perspective has been how to promote company-wide human resource development.

Balancing company-wide, level-specific training with employee development in individual workplaces.

In addition to company-wide level-specific training, Japanese companies are now beginning to strengthen the development of employees' competencies by managers in individual workplaces. In other words, human resource development in the workplace.

Although human resource development in the workplace has been emphasized in Japan in the past, it is no longer easy to develop human resources in the workplace as the environment is changing. In such a changing environment, employee development by managers in the workplace is beginning to be strengthened. The reasons are as follows:

To increase the effectiveness of company-wide level-specific training.

In many Japanese companies, managers are providing more support to employees who have taken the training to apply their new knowledge they have learned in the level-specific training in the workplace.

One reason is to better link company-wide training with the execution of work in the workplace, by allowing employees to use the knowledge they have learned in company-wide level-specific training in the workplace. Employees are now expected to use the knowledge they gain from the company-wide level-specific training in the workplace and apply it to their actual work performance. Therefore, employees share what they have learned in the level-specific training with their managers at their workplace, discuss how to use the knowledge in their actual day-to-day work, and actually apply it. (In particular, human skills, for which it is difficult to immediately apply to the job simply by acquiring the knowledge, need to be improved through application in the workplace.) In this way, managers are now expected more than ever to support their employees in applying what they have learned in the level-specific training to their actual day-to-day work in the workplace.

Responding to changes in the environment, such as a more diverse workforce

Another reason why managers in the workplace have come to strengthen the training of their subordinates is in response to the aforementioned situation where members are becoming more diverse. As members have become more diverse, it has become difficult for managers to understand them. Each member has different values, thoughts, future interests, and career directions. In order to understand the differences among members and utilize them in workplace management, it has become necessary for managers to develop human resources in the workplace through better communication with members. Managers are expected to flexibly change their training methods according to the individuality of each member.

Responding to staff shortages in the workplace

This is related to the shortage of people in the workplace. In many companies, there are fewer people in the workplace than before. Some say that the workload of each person's responsibilities is increasing. This means that each employee is now expected to demonstrate their respective abilities more than ever before. This is why managers need to have a clear understanding of each member's strengths and link them to the achievement of results in the workplace. Managers are now required more than ever to ensure that each and every employee achieves results.

Managers are now expected to set aside time for member development in a time crunch.

However, in many workplaces, managers are also unable to concentrate on management tasks because the number of employees in the workplace is smaller than before, and managers themselves have to act as one player or one person in charge. For example, in a sales department, some sales managers must not only engage in management activities, but must also act as a sales person and a player in the day-to-day activities of the sales department. If the manager spends more time on activities as a player, there will be less time for management activities. In many workplaces, managers also tend to spend less time communicating with workplace members.

For example, when I recently asked about 25 section leaders at a company where I conducted a training course, whether they spend enough time talking with their subordinates, many participants responded that they actually spend less than half of what they consider to be the ideal amount of time talking with their subordinates. This is how little leaders and managers are able to spend time regularly and intentionally communicating with their subordinates. This is just one example of one company, but we have heard of similar occurrences in other Japanese companies.

This is why it is important in Japan these days for managers to regularly set aside time for individual discussions with members of the team. For example, managers should intentionally set aside time to meet with each member individually on a regular basis, even if only for a short period of time. By doing so, the manager can understand the work situation of each member, share issues for growth, and provide advice to support the member. This will also make it easier for managers themselves to manage their workplaces.

Combination of educational means

In addition to company-wide level-specific training and subordinate training by managers in the workplace, human resource development in organizations is now considered to include experience in other departments, rotations, and side jobs. Furthermore, as various technologies such as AI and online conference systems continue to evolve in Japan, these technologies are also being utilized as educational tools. How effective and efficient human resource development can be achieved by combining these various educational means is likely to be a challenge that Japanese companies will have to tackle in the future.

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