

Recruitment and employment practice of Swiss corporations in Japan : Do past achievements equal future success?

Autor(en): **Chiavacci, David**

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RECRUITMENT AND EMPLOYMENT PRACTICE OF SWISS CORPORATIONS IN JAPAN: DO PAST ACHIEVEMENTS EQUAL FUTURE SUCCESS?

David Chiavacci, University of Zurich

Abstract

The Japanese surplus in trade and foreign direct investment with Western economies has been a contentious issue in recent years. Switzerland is, however, an exception as it has managed to maintain a small trade surplus and a balanced foreign direct investment sheet with Japan. What are the factors behind the Swiss success story in Japan? This article attempts to find a partial answer to this question by analyzing the recruitment and human resource management of Swiss corporations as one aspect of critical importance for a successful business in Japan. According to the findings in a survey of 14 companies, Swiss enterprises enjoy a particular image in Japan which depicts their management style as a mixture between Japanese and US-American practice and which also helps them in the recruitment process. Overall, the Japanese employees were satisfied with their employment. The often mentioned problems in the human resource management of foreign-affiliated companies in Japan could not be detected in Swiss corporations, whose practices show surprising similarities to those of Japanese companies. However, the recent fundamental changes in the Japanese context raise the question of whether the previous successful practice of Swiss firms could become an obstacle in the future?

1. Introduction: Swiss Singularity¹

Japan prospered and rose like a phoenix from the ashes of World War II and regained up until the 1970s the status of an economic superpower in the core of the world economy. The accumulation of large surplus in trade and foreign direct investment (FDI) with the advanced industrialized economies of the West accompanied this development and caused strong and recurrent frictions between Japan and the West. However, one exception has been noted in the West: Switzerland has managed to initiate and maintain a trade

1 I would like to thank the Swiss corporations and their employees that kindly participated in the survey. This research project has been supported by a grant of the former Swiss Asia Foundation and has been realized together with Stefania Lottanti. However, the current paper is solely my analysis of the collected data and therefore, I alone am responsible for any shortcomings and/or mistakes.

surplus with Japan in recent years and also serves as one of the major foreign investors in the Japanese market. As an equal trade and investment partner with Japan, it enjoys good economical relationships without any considerable frictions.² These facts raise the question of the factors behind the Swiss success story in Japan.

This article attempts to provide a partial answer to this question by analyzing the image and human resource management (HRM) of Swiss corporations in Japan, based on data collected by written questionnaires and more than 90 in-depth interviews with Japanese staff and the Swiss and Japanese managers in charge of the HRM in 14 Swiss corporations in Japan. The HRM and image of Swiss companies are of special interest because the recruitment of highly qualified Japanese staff, not to mention problems in the HRM in Japan have been crucial and often insuperable obstacles to FDI in Japan until recently. However, the popularity of foreign-affiliated companies (FAC) as employers has sharply increased in the second half of the 90s and the question of how the Swiss companies are doing in the present ever-changing Japanese context will also be addressed.

2. Impediments to FDI in Japan

Before actually analyzing Swiss corporations operating in Japan, I will shortly discuss the barriers of inward FDI in Japan. The low level of FDI and foreign imports in Japan is, according to most Western views, due to obstacles set within Japan.³ The formal and informal regulations of the Japanese government are protecting Japanese corporations against foreign competition and are in fact impeding inward FDI. The *keiretsu* – vertical and horizontal networks between Japanese corporations – are hindering the take-over of Japanese companies and are making the effective distribution of foreign goods in Japan a difficult task. The Japanese side, on the other hand, stresses the examples of successful FAC in Japan and views the inadequacy, lack of competitiveness and ignorance of the bulk of Western companies as the main factors behind the unbalanced investment and trade sheet.⁴ Both sides may have their points.

2 See Katzenstein (1988: 275).

3 See e.g. Mason (1992).

4 See e.g. Komiya (1982: 206).

From the end of World War II up till to the 1970s, Japan was very restrictive regarding FDI. In the view of the Japanese elite, the Japanese economy had to be protected against Western and especially US-American competition that would otherwise dominate the Japanese market and make the prosperity of Japanese enterprises impossible. The Japanese establishment concentrated on a development path without FDI.⁵ Even when in the 1970s the country became gradually open to FDI due to foreign pressure, the Japanese mass media still depicted the risk of a takeover of the Japanese economy by foreign corporations and spoke in allusion to the black ships under Commodore Perry of a 'second wave of black ships' – *daini kurofune*.⁶ However, the perception of FDI has at least partially changed in the last quarter century and the central and local administrations have taken measures to stimulate and facilitate inward FDI. Many economists currently regard Japan as open for imports and FDI as Western economies.⁷

Surveys in the 1980s and first half of the 1990s show accordingly that neither the Japanese regulations nor the networks between Japanese corporations were perceived by FAC as major problems in their business activities in Japan. The high cost of doing business in Japan and the difficulties in recruiting qualified Japanese personnel were identified as the two by far most difficult obstacles for FAC.⁸ Some FAC even 'had to scale back their expansion plans because they could not find enough Japanese personnel.'⁹ Hsu is not the only one who concludes from the empirical research that 'hiring qualified personnel is the greatest difficulty' encountered by FAC in Japan.¹⁰

The problems in recruiting qualified Japanese staff are due to the structure of the Japanese labor market, as well as to the image of the FAC as unreliable employers. The large majority of the qualified Japanese employees are working as core staff in large Japanese corporations, i.e. in the first segment of the labor market. They have a strong, reciprocal commit-

5 See Henderson (1973: 28-29).

6 See Inoue (1998: 8). In July 1853, black ships of the US-Navy under Commodore Matthew Perry arrived in the Edo Bay and forced Japan to open its ports to foreign trade after more than two centuries of strict and nearly absolute seclusion from the outside world (*sakoku*).

7 See Abegglen (1997), Legewie (1998: 302).

8 See among others Dunning (1996: 47), JERI (1990: 57), Shetty/Kim (1995: 35), Mizra/Buckley/Sparkes (1995: 28).

9 Khan/Yoshihara (1994: 122).

10 Hsu (1999: 182).

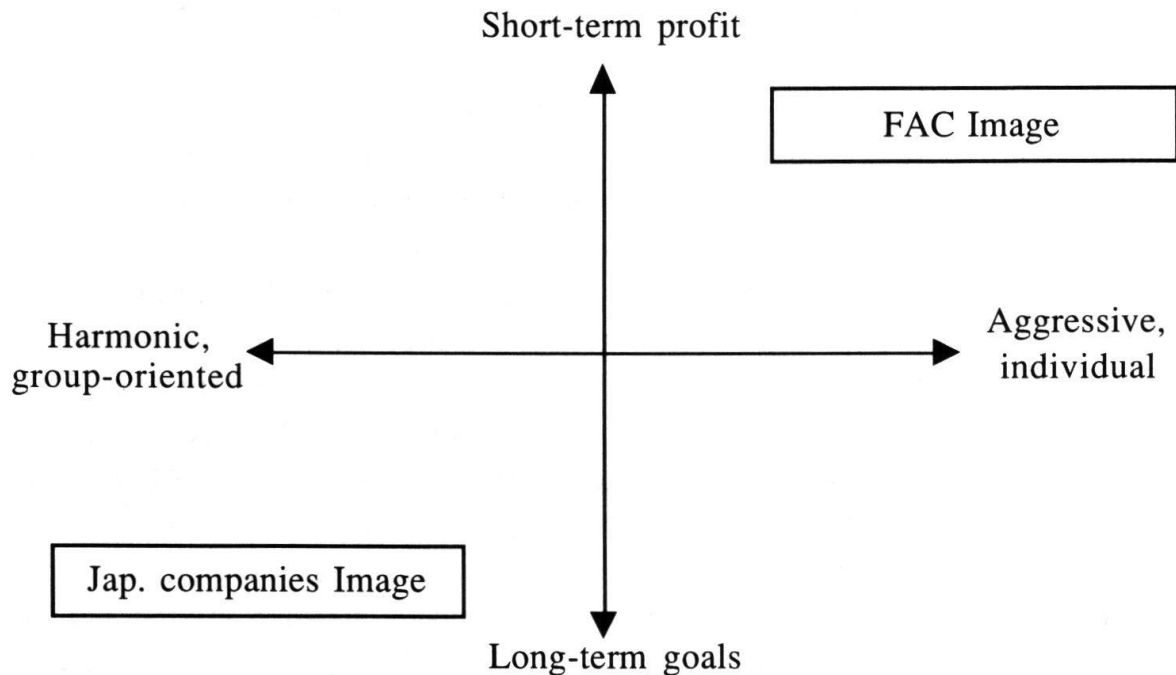
ment with their employer. It is very difficult per se to lure these employees away from their present employment. The recruitment of university graduates would seem to be a good alternative for obtaining qualified Japanese staff. However, due to the semi-institutional and institutional arrangements between large Japanese corporations and top-ranked universities,¹¹ it is already structurally very difficult for FAC to gain access to the brightest university graduates.

3. The Image of FAC in Japan

FAC problems concerning recruitment in Japan are furthermore aggravated because of their image as antipode to the Japanese employment model with its three pillars: long-term employment (*shūshin koyō*), seniority principle (*nenkō joretsu*), and firm-based unions (*kigyōbetsu kumiai*).¹² These employment practices are regarded by the Japanese public as embedded in their own culture and uniquely Japanese. Therefore, while the Japanese companies guarantee their employees high employment security, the FAC are perceived as unreliable employers with a hire and fire doctrine and no loyalty whatsoever to employees. In a Japanese company, an employee can expect a steady increase in salary pay and career advancements in accordance to age (seniority principle); however, in the case of FAC, only current achievements and abilities count regarding remuneration and promotion. Good harmonic relationships between employees and employers exist in Japanese enterprises, thanks to the cooperation between the firm-based unions and the management, but industrial relations in FAC distinguish themselves by recurrent conflicts and frictions. Altogether the image of FAC as antipode to the Japanese employment model can be summarized in a short-term and aggressively individual-oriented management style in contrast to a harmonic and group-based one of Japanese corporations (see figure 1).

11 Regarding the role of institutional and semi-institutional networks in the university-to-work transition of graduates from elite educational institutions, see Chiavacci (2003), Kariya (1998: 323-332), Kariya/Okitsu/Yoshihara/Kondō/Nakamura (1992), Rebick (2000).

12 See Kishi (1996: 160-163), Suwa (1992a: 2-15).

Figure 1 – Image of FAC and Japanese corporations

Recent publications strongly question the alleged unique character of the Japanese employment model. In older research a simple distinction between the Japanese and the Western management style was often made. However, recently common characteristics of the Japanese company governance and management style and those in Germany and other European countries have been noted and a (crude) distinction between a neo-liberal Anglo-Saxon and a neo-cooperative Japanese-Continental-European model has been found to be dominant in the literature.¹³ Empirical research and surveys about the management style of FAC in Japan fail then as well to identify a distinct, non-Japanese management style. Similarities between Japanese and Western corporations are overall dominant.¹⁴ For example, although FAC supposedly have a short-term hire and fire policy, the workforce turnover rate was and is in FAC actually lower than in Japanese companies.¹⁵ Even US-American or British companies, which should be expected to have a different management style in comparison with Japanese corporations, show a strong tendency to adapt to the Japanese context.¹⁶

13 See Dore (2000), Ebbinghaus/Manow (2001: 1-22), Hall/Soskice (2001: 1-68).

14 See Ballon 1992, Konno 1992, MHLW (2001: 25-29), Ōta (1999), Watanabe (1999).

15 See MITI (1999: 74), Konno (1992: 44).

16 See BCCJ (1991: 25).

Still, the FAC cannot overcome their bad reputation as being unreliable and unstable employers because a black and white picture with a strong differentiation between Western and Japanese corporations (as seen above) is dominant in Japanese publications and mass media.¹⁷ Due to their image, FAC have had until recently an inferior social status as employer. Jean-Pierre Lehmann even suggested that in public opinion, 'Japanese nationals working for foreign-affiliated companies tend to be seen as second-class citizens.'¹⁸

However, the image of FAC in Japan is not altogether negative. Apart from the three counterparts of the Japanese employment model, a number of aspects of their image are definitely positive. FAC are believed to pay a higher salary, to give employees career opportunities at a younger age, to have shorter working hours, and a more equal management practice regarding gender.¹⁹ According to their image, Japanese employees in FAC endure a higher unemployment risks and an outsider status in the Japanese society, however provided an employee performs well, he *or she* earns the possibility of working shorter hours, making more money and moving up the ladder faster. In short, because of this general image of FAC, Japanese will typically join FAC because they either cannot find employment in a prestigious Japanese corporation or because they evaluate a non-Japanese management style (higher risks included) as more positive than working for a traditional Japanese management style.²⁰

4. Image and Reality of Swiss Corporations in Japan

How is the image of Swiss corporations in Japan in comparison to the general image of FAC? At least since General Douglas MacArthur advised Japan during the Allied Occupation to become the Switzerland of East Asia, Switzerland has enjoyed an exceptionally good reputation in Japan.²¹ It is seen as a clean, secure, and peaceful country with beautiful nature and a rather traditional lifestyle. This image however, is somehow one-sided, as Switzerland is not regarded as an economically active country with high-

17 See e.g. Hayashi (2000), Komine (2000), Sakimura (1998), Suenaga (1998).

18 Lehmann (1988: 254).

19 See Suwa (1992b: 283-294).

20 See Huddleston (1990: 29), Inohara (1990: 184).

21 For a fuller discussion of the image and reputation of Switzerland in Japan, see the articles by Morita Yasukazu and Harald Meyer in this volume.

ranked education and research facilities. The Japanese employees who were interviewed perceived Switzerland above all things as a tourist destination. Most of them did not know before joining a Swiss company that Switzerland was the home country of large international enterprises.

Even though the perception of Switzerland is therefore limited to the idea of being only a very nice travel destination, its image did end up having a positive influence on the image of the Swiss corporations overall. The majority of the interviewees said that they regarded US-American companies as typical FAC. In contrast to US-American corporations, employment security was regarded as high in Swiss corporations. A second important difference was that Swiss companies were believed to stress continuity and long-term developments as opposed to short-term profits and actual performance, which are generally regarded as typical for FAC. These differences were primarily due to Switzerland's image as a stable and safe country.

On the other hand, the stable and conservative image of Switzerland also had negative effects on the perception of Swiss companies. Gender equality was, according to this reputation only partly implemented, and Swiss corporations were also not regarded as especially dynamic economical players. Therefore, confident people looking for a challenging high paid work with fast career opportunities normally regard Swiss companies less attractive employers than the stereotypical FAC.

The ambiguous image of Swiss companies, depicted by the interviewees, was also confirmed through the findings in the questionnaires. The Japanese employees were asked to which degree they had regarded certain job aspects as an actuality in the Swiss companies before they joined them (see table 1). On the one hand, as it would have been expected due to the image of FAC in Japan, a majority of Japanese employees regarded the Swiss companies as encompassing an international work environment with a performance-based assessment of its employees and only a minority regarded work aspects like company reputation, employment security, and in-house education as a given or as being put into practice in Swiss corporations. However, on the other hand, only a minority of the questioned employees assessed fast career opportunities, non-Japanese management style, good salary, and gender equality an actuality, although these are normally central pillars of the image of FAC.

Table 1 – Almost or fully actualized work aspects before and after joining a Swiss company

	Image Swiss companies	Reality Swiss companies	Difference
International work environment	81.5%	79.1%	- 2.4%
Employment security	41.5%	42.8%	+ 1.3%
Performance-based HRM	53.8%	42.2%	- 11.6%
Further education	42.3%	41.7%	- 0.6%
Gender equality	43.4%	36.5%	- 6.9%
Good salary	43.1%	34.9%	- 8.2%
Good company reputation	32.3%	34.6%	+ 2.3%
Non-Japanese management style	36.4%	28.9%	- 7.5%
Fast career opportunities	20.9%	15.6%	- 5.3%

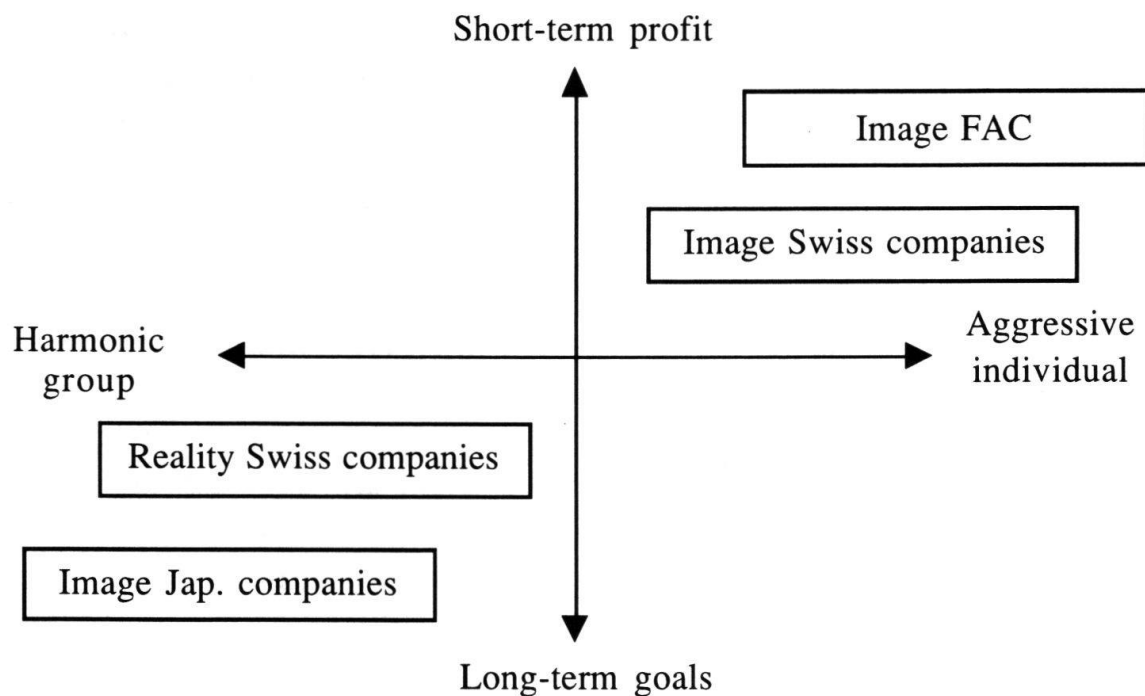
Overall the image of the Swiss companies showed striking differences in comparison to that of FAC and especially the image of US-American companies. The share of employees which expected a non-Japanese management style was low and the number of those which viewed their employment in the Swiss company as secure was relatively high, especially in the large and well-known Swiss corporations in Japan, where the figure amounted to 64% in contrast to 27.5% in small and medium enterprises (SME).²²

To the surprise of most Japanese employees this image description did not totally mesh with what they actually experienced. They did not expect the extent to which the Swiss corporation would have similarities with Japanese companies. Nearly all interviewed Japanese employees classified the business and HRM practices in Swiss companies as nearer to Japanese corporations than to typical FAC. The findings regarding the evaluation of the work characteristics in the questionnaires showed the same tendency. All aspects, which are normally connected with FAC, were, according to the Japanese employees, not in line with their expectations to the same degree as they had expected due to the image (see table 1). This was especially the case for performance-based promotion and payment (-11.6%), especially good salary (-8.2%), non-Japanese management style (-7.5%), high gender equality (-6.9%), and fast career opportunities (-5.3%). On the other hand, aspects

22 Regarding their size and reputation in Japan, the surveyed 14 Swiss corporations can be divided in 8 SME and 6 large and relatively known enterprises.

normally attributed to a Japanese company like employment security, company reputation or further education showed no significant change. In short, the management style they experienced had more similarities to Japanese corporations than expected and was therefore more similar to the image of Japanese corporations than to the one of FAC (see figure 2).

Figure 2 – Image of vs. experienced reality in Swiss corporations



5. Overall Work Satisfaction and Atmosphere

Generally during the interviews, the Japanese employees expressed satisfaction with their jobs in the Swiss corporations. Of course a number of employees were not totally content with their current employment, and a few employees also mentioned in the interview that they were actively looking for new employment, due to their frustration at work. However, this group was only a small minority. The vast majority mentioned negative as well as positive aspects of the company and their work, but as a whole, they were generally satisfied with the Swiss company.

Table 2 – Level of satisfaction by different work aspects

	Work content	Superior	Swiss colleagues	Japanese colleagues	Company structure	Salary	Training and career
++	20.0%	24.2%	15.5%	9.0%	9.0%	4.3%	1.0%
+	52.6%	42.4%	45.2%	46.0%	24.0%	33.0%	17.3%
+/-	21.1%	25.3%	32.1%	38.0%	46.0%	31.9%	41.8%
-	5.3%	7.1%	4.8%	7.0%	16.0%	21.3%	26.5%
--	1.1%	1.0%	2.4%	0.0%	5.0%	9.6%	13.3%

By using the answers in the written questionnaire, scales, based on several items concerning the satisfaction in different aspects of work, were constructed. The results showed unambiguously that the Japanese employees did not feel the same degree of contentment in all aspects of work (table 2). While a clear majority of the answers reported a high level of satisfaction with regards to work content, one's own superior, and the Swiss and Japanese co-workers, satisfaction regarding company structure and salary was mixed, and training and career possibilities even showed dissatisfaction. Some of these work aspects will be further discussed later on.

The large majority of the interviewees also described being part of a Swiss company as enjoying a positive work atmosphere with a 'human touch.' The relationship between work and private life was very balanced. Most interviewees considered Swiss corporations as a good mixture between US-American companies, where human relationships are regarded as too cold and business-related connections only exist at work, and Japanese companies, where private life is incorporated into work and most free time is spent with work colleagues.

Due to the relatively good job security in Swiss companies, Japanese employees did not feel a permanent stress regarding one's performance. The management does not normally expect immediate results and allows time for long-term developments of the business and new employees. However, according to the interviewees, an employee in the Swiss corporations had to be outgoing and have initiative in comparison to those working in Japanese firms. It was not enough to simply sit and wait for job tasks to be handed out. One could only gain appreciation and in the long run compensation for

one's own performance if one participated actively in the business and 'sold' his own achievements to his superiors.

6. Relations between Japanese and Swiss Employees

Cultural differences at work between Western and Japanese employees have often been described as a major problem and a source of in-house frictions in transactional HRM.²³ However, the Japanese staff experienced no major problems in their cooperation and relationships with the Swiss expatriates. Additionally, the Swiss interviewees expressed surprise about the extent of mutual correspondence between the Swiss and Japanese mentality and felt at ease with their Japanese co-workers. Neither side perceived a big culture gap, which interfered with the work process. Quite a large number of the Japanese employees even explicitly said that according to their experiences, the Swiss have in comparison to other Westerners more points in the handling of interpersonal relations in common with the Japanese and that they were willing to adapt to Japan and the Japanese culture.

No significant difference between the assessment of the Swiss and Japanese co-workers appeared in the written survey (see table 2). In addition, regarding the satisfaction with the one's superior, no major difference between Swiss or Japanese managers could be identified (see table 3).

Table 3 – Satisfaction with superior by Swiss or Japanese nationality

	Swiss superior	Japanese superior
++	21.9%	29.0%
+	43.8%	41.9%
+/-	28.1%	19.4%
-	4.7%	9.7%
--	1.6%	-

Their stubbornness was the only negative characteristic of the Swiss, according to a large number of Japanese employees. Even though it was not asked directly, nearly a third of the Japanese interviewees described the Swiss ex-

23 See e.g. Taplin (1995: 138-139).

patriates as stubborn (*ganko*). It was said that the Swiss did not easily change their opinion in business matters and in general, acted obstinately. The same tendency resulted in the written questionnaire. The percentage of interviewees assessing their Swiss co-workers as stubborn actually doubled in comparison to how they described their Japanese fellow employees (see table 4).

Table 4 – Description of Swiss and Japanese co-workers regarding stubbornness

	Exactly	More or less	Not so much	Not at all
Swiss co-workers	29.1%	40.0%	19.1%	11.8%
Jap. co-workers	7.9%	27.8%	48.4%	15.9%

On the level of HRM during the interviews, a considerable number of the Japanese employees of the well known, big Swiss corporations and especially employees in management positions complained about inequality regarding nationality. They felt that Swiss employees were better treated than they were and that they were only second-class employees in the firm. Some Japanese managers said that according to their own experiences, in regards to nationality and the treatment of employees, the treatment was generally much more equal in US-American companies. Career possibilities in a Swiss company for people without a Swiss passport were perceived as limited with a relatively low 'glass ceiling' of promotion for Japanese employees. Many of them also had the impression that they were being left out and not being informed of crucial information from the Swiss headquarters.

In the smaller, relatively unknown Swiss corporations the situation was similar. The Japanese employees also regarded their possibilities to attain important management positions as limited. However, interestingly nearly all of them argued that this was somehow inevitable, as the Japanese branch of the corporation was dependent upon the knowledge and technology of the headquarters back in Switzerland.

The tendency of Swiss corporations in Japan to fill the important management positions with Swiss nationals has also been noted elsewhere. In one study, nearly two thirds of the surveyed 422 FAC in Japan had a Japanese CEO, but this was the case only in less than a quarter of the Swiss

corporations.²⁴ In addition, in the sample of the present study, only 3 of the 14 Swiss companies (21.4%) employed a Japanese CEO. Some Swiss managers argued in the interviews that the main reason behind this reluctance to fill the upper management positions with Japanese nationals and to appoint instead Swiss managers in important positions in Japan was to maintain better control of the Japanese branches by the headquarters in Switzerland.

7. Strong Aspects of the Swiss HRM

According to the literature, the two major problems of FAC regarding HRM are the differing preferences of the Japanese employees regarding management style and the weak commitment of the qualified staff. As noted above, the main reason for a part of the Japanese employees to join FAC is their antipathy to Japanese HRM practices. This group of employees seeks in a FAC salary based on his or her individual performance, a fast career track, and a bigger individual freedom than he or she can obtain in a Japanese firm. However, a second group of Japanese employees only works for FAC because they could not find suitable employment in a Japanese firm. Especially if they have no work experience in a Japanese company, this group tends to have an idealized image of Japanese firms. They will always compare their actual situation at work with the idealized model in their minds.

The management of FAC in Japan is, therefore, often in a sandwich-like position between one part of its employees, who press for a more non-Japanese management approach, and a second group, which wants the company to be more like their ideal Japanese model company in its management practice.²⁵ Besides, the gap between the two groups is also the perfect grounds for factionalism inside the company.

These problems could also be perceived to a certain degree as being prevalent in Swiss corporations. However, the conflict of interest between the two groups is much smaller and much less virulent in Swiss companies than it is often described in the literature. The majority of the Japanese employees regarded their Swiss employers and corporations as a good mixture between FAC and Japanese companies. Especially the employees over 40 years of age often praised the Swiss firms as the ideal blending of the Western short-term and individualized and the Japanese long-term and group-oriented manage-

24 See Khan/Yoshihara (1994: 116-117).

25 See Huddleston (1990: 50-51).

ment styles. Young employees in their 20s and early 30s often wished, on the other hand, that ability and achievement would be more important in HRM of Swiss corporations, especially regarding pay and promotion. Seniority was for them overemphasized. This generation gap was, however, altogether not very deep and not a single manager saw a crucial problem herein. This may be due to the fact that Swiss corporations, because of their image and HRM, do not attract the type of Japanese employees who wish to work in a totally non-Japanese environment.

FAC often encounter serious problems regarding the commitment of the Japanese employees to the company. It has been widely noted in the literature, that part of the Japanese employees often switch between FAC.²⁶ Particularly qualified Japanese staff have the strong tendency to stay only for a short time in FAC. A quarter of the FAC surveyed by Khan and Yoshihara stated that the non-existence of long-term loyalty toward employers was a major problem for them.²⁷

FAC's problems regarding work commitment of their Japanese staff is at first glance surprising. The Japanese workforce is generally known for having a strong identification to their company and, as noted above, the overall turnover rate in FAC is even smaller than in Japanese companies. The missing commitment is partly due to those Japanese employees who prefer a non-Japanese management style, which means in their view also no long-term loyalty of the employer to the employees. Basically, if they find a better job, they simple resign.

The second main reason is the dependency of FAC in the recruitment of headhunters. Because it is difficult to find adequate Japanese managers and engineers for FAC, they rely on the service of headhunters. However, the headhunters know that the easiest targets for filling a vacancy is the qualified staff of other FAC, who are normally much more willing to move from one company to another. As a result, the FAC are basically hunting and stealing the qualified staff from each other by using specialized employment agencies. The result of these two mechanisms are Japanese employees who are often changing jobs by circulating between FAC, otherwise known as a 'foreign' labor market in Japan.²⁸

According to their human resource managers, Swiss corporations did not have any specific problems regarding the work commitment of Japanese

26 See Huddleston (1990: 46), Morgan/Morgan (1991: 187), Schneidewind (1998: 295).

27 See Khan/Yoshihara (1994: 128).

28 See Inohara (1990: 185-186), Konno (1992: 53-54).

employees. Additionally, the large majority of the Japanese staff said that they saw no reason to change their employer, as they were overall generally satisfied with their current situation. Even in those Swiss corporations, which currently have problems in their business activities in Japan, the Japanese employees showed surprisingly strong commitment. Again, this may also be partly due to the fact that Swiss companies do not attract Japanese employees who are eager to work in a non-Japanese environment. Furthermore, Swiss corporations typically refrain from the use of headhunters in their recruitment and primarily rely on their social network in Japan. According to the written survey, while about one third of the Japanese managers (32.4%) joined a Swiss enterprise through a headhunter, more than half of them (54.1%) were introduced to the company or job vacancy by a friend or acquaintance.²⁹ Furthermore, the Japanese managers expressed generally a rather strong commitment to their Swiss employer. Although most of them said that they would surely change to another company if they were to receive a very attractive job offer, most expressed overall satisfaction with their current employment and felt no special urge to leave in the near future.

8. Weak Points in the Swiss HRM

The gender inequality in the Japanese labor market is well known. The share of women in decision-making positions in the private economy or in the public administration is extremely low in comparison to Western countries. Indeed, Japan is the only industrial country where the higher education of women has a negative effect on her job prospects.³⁰ Also the implementation of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law in 1985 and its reinforcement in 1999 has not fundamentally changed the labor market reality for Japanese women in recent years. On the contrary, women have been far more affected by the drop in the labor market demand due to the recession of the 1990s.³¹

The reluctance of Japanese enterprises to promote women has been an opportunity for FAC to gain access to highly qualified female Japanese

29 As comparison, according to the survey of the MHLW on the human resource management and industrial relations in FAC over 70% of the FAC use headhunters for the recruitment of managers, while only 35.4% rely on their social networks, see MHLW (2001: 14).

30 See Kurosawa/Genda (2001: 10-11).

31 See Hara/Seiyama (1999: 168), Recruit Research (1996: 9), Shire/Imai (2000).

staff.³² It is, therefore, hardly surprising that the average percentage of female managers in FAC is clearly higher than in Japanese companies.³³ Specifically young work-oriented Japanese women with higher education regard FAC as attractive employers who offer far better career opportunities. However, this is only the case in a minority of the Swiss companies in Japan.

As noticed above, due to the rather conservative image of Switzerland, Swiss enterprises are not considered employers with progressive management principles who pay strong attention to gender equality. According to their answers in the written surveys, only a minority of 43.4% of the Japanese employees thought the principle of gender equality could become reality in the Swiss corporation. And based upon the actual experiences of Japanese employees in the work place, the percentage of those who thought that gender equality was an actuality decreased even further to 36.5%.

In addition, the findings in the interviews reaffirm altogether the inequality by gender in Swiss companies in Japan. According to their female Japanese staff, although a small minority of the Swiss companies gives equal employment opportunities to women, the majority seems to clearly disappoint their female employees in this regard. Some Swiss firms were even described as being as equally male-dominated as conservative Japanese enterprises. Furthermore, the Swiss expatriates and Japanese managers, who were in nearly all surveyed Swiss companies without exception men, showed no strong interest in the furtherance and promotion of female staff, according to the interviewed Japanese women.

The human resource managers in the interviews generally argued on their part that it was very difficult for the company to implement a real gender equality management practice as gender related differences are deeply rooted in the Japanese society. While in a few companies the human resource department actively followed a female supportive policy, overall, most corporations were very passive in this field and seemed to regard female employees as not especially valuable human resources.

In the written survey, the Japanese employees expressed the largest dissatisfaction with training and career opportunities in the Swiss corporations (see table 2). In fact, nearly 40% of the employees were dissatisfied in this aspect. When the findings of the questionnaire and the interviews were closer analyzed, clear patterns regarding the dissatisfaction with one's training and career come out.

32 See Christopher (1986: 86-87), Huddleston (1990: 50).

33 See Debroux (1994: 122), Ōta (1999: 26).

The dissatisfaction in training and education showed clear correlation to the size of the corporation in Japan. According to the written survey, only 10.8% of the employees in the large and well-known Swiss firms in Japan were unhappy with training and career opportunities, whereas 64.6% considered further education possibilities as actualities. On the other hand, nearly half (47.5%) of the employees in SME reported dissatisfaction with education and career opportunities and just 27.9% regarded further education as an actuality. In the in-depth interviews, the employees of SME regarded the available further education possibilities as inadequate. The education program in the SME consisted only in on-the-job training at below standard. The managers in the small Swiss corporations often recognized the poor training system, but stressed the lack of resources as hindrance for improvements. In contrast, the offered education in large Swiss corporations was generally regarded as much better. Some Japanese employees even praised the furthering education system of large Swiss corporations as very good and broad.

The dissatisfaction with the career prospects was primarily connected with the gender issue. While 53.2% female employees were not satisfied with training and career opportunities, a little bit more than a quarter (27.1%) of the male employees were dissatisfied. Due to the discriminatory HRM for women in most Swiss corporations, the female staff did not believe to have a fair chance at being promoted. Many female interviewees said that female employees had only slight career possibilities and therefore, should change employers if they seriously wanted to move up the career ladder. Generally, the dissatisfaction of the male staff regarding career opportunities was much lower. However, as noted above, especially the preferential treatment of Swiss nationals in large corporations was often a stressed reason for grievance during the interviews.

From the manager point of view, the lack in drive and entrepreneurship of the Japanese staff were the biggest problems in HRM. The general passiveness can only hardly be overcome. On the other hand, employees with work experience in US-American companies described Swiss corporations as comparatively more hierarchical and the internal discussion and decision-making processes as less open. An employee cannot be as straightforward and can often express his opinion to his superior only in a buffered, diplomatic way. Overall, the Swiss management style was described as not very open for change and not very innovative. Again, the conservative

image and management style of Swiss companies is not attractive for young dynamic and aggressively career-oriented Japanese.

9. The Boom of FAC as Employers and Swiss Companies

While FAC in the beginning of the 1990s were struggling and rather desperate when it came to finding qualified Japanese staff, new possibilities have opened up in recent years that were not only unexpected, but of such a magnitude that it is accurate to speak of a boom of FAC as employers in Japan.³⁴ On one hand, a diversification in the work-related values can be identified in surveys. Parts of the younger generations are less willing than their fathers and grandfathers to devote their life to the sake of a company. They show a preference for a more individualistic and merit-based salary and promotion system.³⁵ On the other hand, the recession, beyond motivating the relaxation in the labor demand, has also raised questions about the future of the Japanese labor and management model. Correspondingly, the perceptions of FAC have fundamentally changed. Not too long ago, most of FAC were regarded in Japan as examples of an outdated and in-competitive model. However, at the turn of the millennium, they suddenly seem to incorporate the bright model of the future.

The FAC are en vogue for elite university graduates. The percentage of graduating students from Tokyo University who are seriously interested in FAC has skyrocketed from 3.9% in 1997 to 26.3% in 1998 and similar tendencies have also been registered in many other prestigious and famous universities in Japan.³⁶ The ratio of graduates of the prestigious Keiō University who have actually joined FAC has, for example, more than doubled from 5.1% in 1996 to 10.7% in 2000.³⁷ The boom of FAC as employers is not only limited to university graduates. In addition to university graduates, experienced Japanese workers show a much stronger interest in FAC in recent years.³⁸

The human resource managers of the Swiss corporations confirmed this boom of the FAC in recent years. All but one manager whose company had

34 See Chiavacci (2002: 23-29).

35 See e.g. Imada (2000), MCA (1999).

36 See *Works* (1998: 5).

37 See Naito (2000: 19).

38 See JETRO (2000: 35).

already in the past enjoyed an outstanding image in the Japanese public opinion thought that their company had become more attractive to future employees and that they were more satisfied with the outcome of their recruitment efforts in recent years. When the managers were asked about the barriers of doing business in Japan in the questionnaire, problems in recruitment and HRM were no major issues.

The Japanese staff also endorsed this view. The social status of the FAC has significantly increased in recent years. The Japanese employees did not feel 'soiled' any longer in the public perception in Japan, or as bearing an outsider status like described in literature.³⁹ However, many interviewees expressed strong reservations regarding the boom of Swiss corporations. Due to their proximity to Japanese firms, Swiss firms would only partly profit from the new evaluation of FAC. Moreover, nearly all employees would generally recommend their current employer, but many also pointed out that the Swiss corporations were not really suitable for those of the younger generations who were looking for a challenging, individualistic employment in FAC. Even though the reliability of Swiss corporations as employers was not questioned by the ongoing recession, they also seem not to incorporate the new management and success model of the future.

10. Conclusion

The success of Swiss corporations can be attributed of course not only to the discussed HRM. Other factors like products that are suitable for the Japanese market, a good management strategy, etc. are of crucial importance as well. But the present empirical study helps to explain the strong presence of Swiss companies in Japan in comparison to FAC from other Western nations. Swiss enterprises enjoyed, first of all, a specific image in Japan. Due to the safe and rather traditional image of Switzerland, they are believed to be relatively stable and secure employers, in comparison to the general image of FAC and especially US-American companies. This image has substantially facilitated recruitment of qualified Japanese staff. The adaptation to the Japanese context was facilitated by similarities in the management style of Swiss and Japanese corporations. Both have a rather long-term approach in their business goals. The integration in Japan was furthermore facilitated by

39 See e.g. Ballon (1992: 31), Huddleston (1990: 41).

proximity in the mentality between Swiss and Japanese. On the interpersonal level, the cooperation and relations between Swiss and Japanese exist without irreconcilable differences. All these factors contributed to a relatively problem-free HRM in Swiss enterprises in Japan in comparison to many other FAC from other countries.

Apart from their flexibility in adapting to Japan, Swiss companies also showed strong rigidities. They were eager to keep control over the management through a relatively large number of Swiss expatriates. They also showed perseverance in pursuing their business goals and in establishing themselves in Japan. As the survey shows, Swiss corporations have today social networks today at their disposal, which allows them to fill the majority of their management jobs with Japanese people without the help of headhunters. These rigidities in company structure and long-term goals may also explain why many Japanese employees regarded their Swiss colleagues as stubborn.

The employment and recruitment practices of Swiss corporations also have its shady side. While many FAC have successfully promoted qualified female staff, the majority of the Swiss corporations were passive and reserved in this aspect. The strong control of the management through the headquarters in Switzerland means limited career possibilities for the Japanese employees. It is therefore not surprising that, according to the interviewed managers, the missing drive of the Japanese employees is the major problem in HRM. The Japanese employees described the Swiss companies as not being suitable for young, dynamic employees who are looking for a challenge, as the career possibilities are rather limited and the management is rather bureaucratic. Swiss corporations seem, therefore, only to have profited partly from the boom of FAC in the second half of the 1990s. Will the image and management style, which has been an important aspect for the success in the past, be a braking factor in the changing Japanese context and mentality?

Beyond recruitment and HRM, many Japanese employees have argued in the interviews that Swiss companies neither took risks nor were they very innovative. The same point of view is taken in a recent research paper of the Swiss Science Council. Although Swiss corporations have all basic requirements for participating successfully in the worldwide competition for innovation, they have a rather conservative management mentality and refrain from taking risks in new fields of activity.⁴⁰ It must also be noted that after decades of being a model of success, the Swiss economy, as well as the

40 See Schweizerischer Wissenschaftsrat (1999).

Japanese economy, has been struggling in the last years. However, it may be too early to predict the end of the Swiss success story in Japan. HRM is only one part of an institutional setting with certain advantages and disadvantages. Swiss and Japanese corporations may, for example, have problems in implementing radical innovation,⁴¹ but in the long run they could be successful once again with their step-by-step, incremental way of innovation.

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41 See Hall and Soskice (2001: 38-41).

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