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# Reconceptualizing the interdependent psychological contract in German and Japanese corporations

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## **Abstract**

The employee-based core competencies of the corporations increasingly become the crucial non-imitable source for sustainable competitive advantages, especially with regard to knowledge creation and technological innovation. The paper discusses generic modes of psychological contracts between companies and their employees and the impact of these contracts on corporate core competencies. Further, it analyzes how the long-term, 'interdependent' psychological contract in Japanese and German corporations is changing now as well as possible consequences of this change. Finally, the paper identifies new tasks of the human resource management (HRM) in both countries which result from this change and are essential for the competitive strength of the corporations.

**Keywords** : *psychological contract, innovation, human resource management, core competencies, construal of self, employment arrangement, downsizing, Germany, Japan.*

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## I、 Employee-based core competencies of the corporation

In the era of so-called mega-competition, both German and Japanese corporations faces very serious challenges which cause a strong need for a creative response in many fields of human resource management (HRM):

- *Increasing innovation speed and innovation rate* enhance a necessity to recruit and motivate highly qualified, creative 'knowledge workers';
- *Globalization of markets and corporate value chains* – as many large companies establish production and R&D facilities abroad and are also involved in international strategic alliances, they have to learn how to manage diversity, especially in international teams;
- *Individualization of customer needs* – because it puts pressure on the companies to look for means, by which they can set themselves apart from the competition;
- *Costs' pressure* – because it forces drastic cost cutting programs that usually affect the labor costs and thereby both the employees and the HRM;
- *Value changes and shifts of social and demographic structure of work force* (e.g., *aging*) – because they force companies to look for new concepts of leadership, new organizational structures, and new incentive systems;
- *Shareholders' pressure* – as this pressure pushes the management to look for new strategic corporate goals and to pursue these goals more intensively and with other means than in the past.

In which way do the HR managers in Japanese and German companies handle these common challenges to create sustainable competitive advantages? To give an answer to this strategically important question it is obviously necessary to choose an adequate concept from the area of strategic management. For this purpose one can use the resource-based view that has recently been considered as a most influential management paradigm, developed by Western and Japanese researchers as well. According to the resource-based view, the sustainable competitive advantages are owing to the consistent set of core competencies of the company. The most important characteristics that allow to identify these competencies are as follows [1]:

- *Core competencies contribute to the customer satisfaction;*

- *Core competencies are distinctive and difficult for competitors to imitate;*
- *Core competencies are based primarily on knowledge and commitment of the employees;*
- *Core competencies are cross-functional, and they embody coordinated actions of many employees;*
- *From all the core competencies the capability to create and deploy relevant knowledge becomes a matter of critical importance.*

These characteristics demonstrate that the core competencies are mostly employee-based. Accordingly, the management of the relationship between the companies and their employees, particularly, the management of the psychological contracts, that involve idiosyncratic explicit and tacit beliefs about the mutual obligations of employer and employees [2], is gaining in importance for the creation of the employee-based competencies. The term psychological contract was introduced in the 1960s by Levinson (1962) and Schein (1965) especially in the context of motivational theories. Additionally, the theory of "latent social identities", that is, the self-identification of the employees with various social groups inside and outside the organization, has been developed by Gouldner (1957). In recent years the intensity of the discussion concerning psychological contracts has noticeably increased. In what follows, the psychological contracts in Japanese and German companies are discussed to find out, how the companies in both countries manage them now under the pressure of mega-competition which has been mentioned above, and what consequences the changing psychological contracts cause for the creation of core competencies.

## **II · Modes of psychological contracts in organizations**

Many American, European, and Japanese researchers and practitioners identified different modes of organizational membership and psychological contracts which are summarized in Table 1:

**Table 1** Modes of Organizational Membership/Psychological Contract

Author	Modes of Organizational Membership/Psychological Contracts	
	Feature compared	Mode of Membership/Contract
Gouldner 1957, 1959	Latent social identities	Locals (in production and marketing) Cosmopolitans (in the R & D)
Handy 1989	Core vs. non-core work	Professional core Contractors Part-time/ temporary workers
Nikkeiren 1995	Employment contract & degree of flexibility	Flexible employment group Specialist employees Core group
Rousseau et al. 1995-1999	Contract duration & Performance terms	Members of transactional contract Members of relational contract Members of transitional contract Members of balanced contract
Sattelberger 1996, 1998	Number of employment options that the individual has & Price of the work force	Multi-skilled core workers & core management teams Multi-skilled knowledge workers New independent service workers Fluid mass of part-time workers on the organizational 'periphery'
Fliaster 2000	Construal of self & Mode of psychological contract created through the HRM and knowledge management	'Company men' who have the interdependent construal of self and prefer long-term, loyalty-based employment arrangements 'Men of the job' who have the independent construal of self and prefer contingent, 'non-regular' employment arrangements

Despite some primarily culture-specific differences it can be mentioned that large German and Japanese companies traditionally consider a *long-term, relational, interdependent* contract an ideal and practice it at least in respect of their core employees. To illustrate the idiosyncratic features of the interdependent contract more clearly, the Japanese and German systems are compared with the Anglo-Saxon model (table 2).

**Table 2** Common features of the interdependent psychological contracts of Japanese and German corporations in contrast to the Anglo-Saxon companies [3]

Companies	Large Japanese and German Corporations	Large American and British Corporations
Traditional mode of the psychological contract	Long-term, relational contract, based on the idea about the interdependence of the company and its employees	Short-term, transactional contract, based on the idea about the mutual independence of the company and its employees
National culture	Strong collectivistic elements	Strong individualistic elements
Basic assumption about the core element of the employment relationship	Company as a 'shared fate community'	'Job' as a set of measurable, mostly monetizable rights and obligations
Duration of the psychological contract	Rather long-term	Rather short- and mid-term
Basic employment principle	Employment security	Employability
Remuneration system	Rather seniority-based remuneration	Rather performance- and market-based payments
Main socio-emotional competencies of the employees fostered by the contract	Ability to act as a 'Company Man', that is, as a member of organizational community	Ability to realize saleable abilities and skills of the individual, act as a 'Self Inc.'
Dominant type of corporate innovation fostered by the contract	Continuous, experience-based, mostly incremental innovations in established industries, like the car industry, machine-building, and electrical engineering	Radical innovations (technological breakthroughs) in emerging, especially high-technology industries

From table 2 many important conclusions result. First, it has to be noted that the psychological contract is rather an *experienced practice* than a written document. This is especially true for Japan where the interdependent employment arrangement expresses an expectation of employees and a moral obligation of the employer to respond to their expectation and does not contain a legal right-obligation relationship [4].

Second, the specific mode of the psychological contract is connected to

idiosyncratic features of the national culture. One of the most powerful ways in which cultural context influences individual behavior and therefore the work attitudes is through its influence on the *meanings and practices of the self* [5]. Whether a person defines his or her self as separate from others or as partially overlapping with them is conceptually the most fundamental aspect of individualism and collectivism [6], and this "*construal of self*" [7] is central to the behavior of a person; therefore it strongly affects the mode of psychological contract that the person basically prefers. In particular, the primary unit of conscious reflection of Japanese people is not a set of unique inner attributes of the person but rather the belonging to a social relation: Japanese people see reality typically in the physical interaction with other human beings and traditionally strive to realize themselves primarily in their relationship to others. [8] Accordingly, the fundamental factor which governs the structure and function of large Japanese organizations that deploy and promote context-oriented people with an interdependent construal of self is the *company-specific human capital* [9].

This culture-specific basic assumption about a *corporation as accumulation of various interpersonal relations* [10] shapes the basic ideas that workers and managers have about what the employer-employee relationship, i.e. the psychological contract, is and what it ought to be. While the traditional relational psychological contract of Japanese employees is focused on the complex network of mutual long-term socio-emotional obligations, the transactional contract in Anglo-Saxon companies is based primarily on task-related, especially monetizable obligations of people who define themselves as upholders of special, measurable services rather than a member of stable intraorganizational community.

Third, table 2 demonstrates that the HR management routines must be considered as a *system*, that is, as a collection of elements that are complementary to one another. To be efficient, all elements, such as recruitment, remuneration, and training, have to be compatible with the specific psychological contract a company practices.

Fourth, the dominant mode of the psychological contract forms the company-specific mechanism of knowledge creation and therefore the building of core competencies, because of the fact that it affects what kind of knowledge can and has to be accumulated by the employees, and when and how the employees have to use this knowledge. For instance, the empirical observation that Japanese top managers prefer the intraorganizational variety amplification at least partly can be explained through the low

interorganizational mobility of highly qualified Japanese work force [11]: Unlike an American corporation that can increase the heterogeneity of its knowledge base, that is to ensure the inflow of new ideas and experiences from outside, by means of the 'hire-and-fire'-strategy, the long-term interdependent psychological contract sets narrow limits to such '*organizational blood transfusion*' in Japan. Therefore, a Japanese corporation needs rather internal than external management mechanisms (such as the job rotation) to make the knowledge base of every employee more heterogeneous.

### **III - Strengths and weaknesses of an interdependent psychological contract in German and Japanese companies in regard to the creation of core competencies**

Because the interdependent psychological contract between the corporations and their core personnel can be considered to be a traditional pillar of the HRM in large Japanese and German companies, it is important to remark the strengths and weaknesses of this interdependent contract in regard of the development of distinctive employee-based core competencies, especially the collective ability of employees to create and deploy knowledge [12]:

- The interdependent psychological contract lets the employees consider the company as a '*people association*' where mutual trust and loyalty are strongly encouraged.
- Mutual loyalty also means that the 'company men', that is the corporate knowledge creators, don't leave the company voluntarily in a time of economic turmoil, but work even harder to turn the company around.
- Under the long-term employment arrangements the employees mostly evolve corporate-specific knowledge and capabilities, particularly the social knowledge which encourages the interpersonal communication and cooperation.
- Because many of the knowledge components accumulated by the 'company men' are based on experience and specific to the corporate context, they are mostly tacit. Therefore the long-term relational



psychological contract sets prerequisites for a so-called high-context communication [13] and encourage understanding and cooperation.

- This company-related idiosyncrasy of employees' knowledge can also help to explain why many large Japanese and German companies have created their competitive advantages especially through cumulative process innovations. [14].
- The relationship between the interdependent psychological contract and the company-related idiosyncrasy of knowledge and innovation is a mutual one: On the one hand the cohesive nature of the Japanese companies encourages the accumulation, sharing and transfer of knowledge inside the organizational borders [15], on the other hand, it impedes the transfer of knowledge and people between organizations. [16]

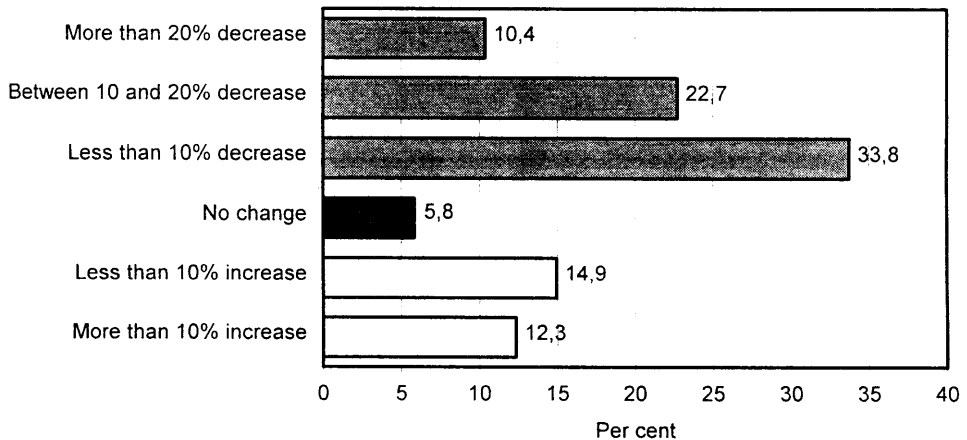
Within recent years, however, changes in both Japanese and German companies have been taking place. This change process can be described as the penetration of the established system of the interdependent psychological contract by individualistic, market-oriented elements. In regard to the employee-based core competencies of the corporations these changes strongly affect both their socio-emotional dimension (e.g., trust, loyalty, and commitment) and the cognitive one (qualifications, ways of learning, etc.).

## **IV 、 Reconceptualizing the interdependent psychological contract in German and Japanese companies**

In order not to go beyond the scope of this paper, only one crucial dimension of this contract change – the duration of the employment relationship – and its consequences will be taken into consideration, while other essential aspects, such as monetary rewards (seniority-based pay under the relational contract versus primarily performance-based payments under the transactional one) or training systems are not considered. In both Germany and Japan, two driving forces of the contract change can be observed: First, the increasing number of dismissals, and second, the increasing number of people under non-regular, that is, contingent employment arrangements. These trends are analyzed below.

## 1. Reconceptualizing the interdependent psychological contract in German companies

In recent years, many large German corporations have diluted the long-term interdependent psychological contract. According to an empirical survey conducted by Marr/Steiner/Schloderer in 1998, 154 from 235 investigated German companies, that is 66 percent, have adjusted their personnel capacity in 1995-1998 in different ways (e.g., layoffs, early retirement, reduction of daily working hours); many of them reduced the number of the employees (see Figure 1). Noticeably enough, many companies pointed out that this adjustment was caused by fundamental challenges in the business environment listed above.



**Figure 1** Change of the number of employees at German companies that adjusted their personnel capacity between 1995 and 1998 (Source: Marr/Steiner/Schloderer 1998)

These personnel capacity adjustments have most strongly affected the employees with more than 10-year tenure of office, i.e. the 'company men', and remarkably, not only those in their 50s, who could be early retired. 25 percent of these companies have communicated that their employees between the ages of 35 and 50 years old were "strongly affected", and at

further 66 percent of the companies this group of 'company men' (and women) was affected "to some degree." [17] These data implicate the conclusion that many German companies have stopped to practice a life-time interdependent psychological contract with their employees. The most actual data confirm this suggestion: in the last months of 2001, many layoffs at leading German companies in industry and services have been announced. In particular, Siemens will cut 20,000 jobs, MAN – 6,000 jobs, Infineon – 5,000, and BASF – 4,000 jobs; the 4 biggest German banks – Deutsche Bank, Hypo-Vereinsbank, Dresdner Bank, and Commerzbank – will cut about 25,000 jobs. [18] According to a survey conducted by the Association of German Chambers of Industry and Commerce in fall 2001, all sectors of the German economy have cut back on their employment plans from the beginning of 2001. Moreover, the level of employment in Germany must be expected to be again down in 2002. In particular, industrial and services-providing companies with more than 200 employees, especially stock exchange-listed ones, are drastically reducing their levels of employment. [19]

In addition to the layoffs, in recent years, the interdependent, permanent contract is being increasingly diluted by the fast-growing number of *contingent* employment arrangements. In particular, in 2000, the share of temporary contracts in Germany rose to 13 percent. While in the late 1980s the share of full-time, permanent jobs has been about 70 percent, now it is significantly below 60 percent. [20]

The both changes – corporate downsizing as well as dissemination of contingent employment arrangements – can be also increasingly observed in Japanese companies.

## **2. Reconceptualizing the interdependent psychological contract in Japanese companies**

Not only have the Japanese companies to handle the challenges of the mega-competition mentioned above, but they also still have to overcome the Japanese economy's most dramatic post-war recession. The main economic reason to transform the long-term interdependent psychological contract lies in the pressure of high labor costs which becomes very critical matter especially in the hard times of economic turmoil. In the mid 1990s almost 70 percent of large Japanese corporations mentioned that they have too many managerial workers (*kanrishoku*), i.e. too many elderly white collars. [21] In

the 2000s, this problem is still acute: To take an example, in 2001 Matsushita Electric Industrial Co. has 13,000 more payroll workers than it needs. [22]

Even under such drastic costs' pressure the majority of Japanese companies is still striving to avoid mass layoffs. According to a survey of the top 8,000 companies in Japan ranked according to their paid-up capital, number of employees, and turnover in 1999, which has been conducted by the Japanese Recruit's Work Institute, the average Japanese firm protects employment *as much as possible*, even if corporate performance takes a downturn. [23] Other actual data also confirm that many Japanese firms still rely on the relational, interdependent psychological contract: According to the preliminary findings of the survey conducted by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, employment levels were adjusted in Japanese companies during the October — December 2000 quarter by restricting overtime work (in 11% of the firms surveyed), by reassigning employees to other parts of the business (7%), by temporary transfer (5%), by reducing (or stopping altogether) mid-year intakes of new employees (4%), by increasing holiday leave and days-off (2%), by dismissing or otherwise making redundant temporary workers (2%), and by calling for the voluntary retirement of regular employees (2%). According to this survey, the preference for these methods of employment adjustment is more-or-less the same as that which has been observed during the oil crisis in the 1970s, and therefore the termination of long-term contracts with regular employees seems to be still regarded as a *last resort* for Japanese firms. [24].

Nevertheless, in recent years many large Japanese companies started to announce workforce reduction plans. To take an example, Toshiba Corp., the No. 2 in the world semiconductor industry, felt that the conventional style of restructuring that maintains domestic jobs intact can not enable the company to respond to competitive challenges; in August 2001 Toshiba announced to reduce its domestic workforce by 12 percent by fiscal 2003, that is, to slash 17,000 jobs in Japan. [25]. This restructuring plan follows on workforce reductions by other electronics giants Matsushita Electric Industrial and NEC Corp.: Matsushita Electric Industrial, a company that championed Japan's lifelong employment system since it was founded, announced its first-ever personnel downsizing plan in July 2001. [26]

This trend towards layoffs can be generalized: In December 2001, the unemployment rate in Japan climbed to the record high 5.6 percent, and among the unemployed, the number of people who lost their jobs involuntarily rose by 310,000 to 1,25 million, increasing for the fifth month in a row. [27]

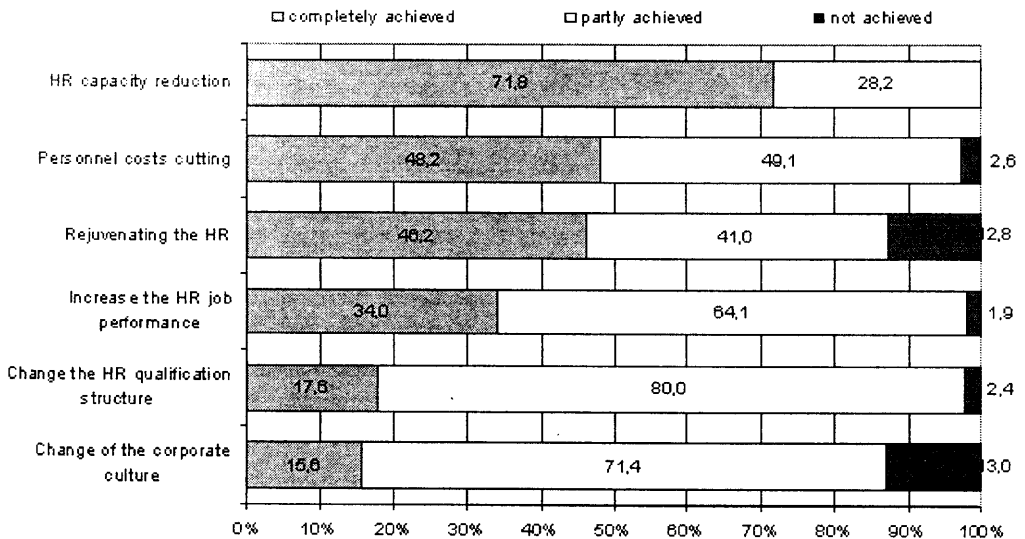
Additionally, a shift towards the increased use of *contingent* employment can be observed in Japan. Particularly, a survey of Japanese establishments with 30 or more regular-status workers, which was conducted in 1999 by the Japanese Institute of Labor demonstrated that Japanese companies that are performing poorly decrease the number of regular-status employees and increase the use of non-regular employees. This means that in poorly performing firms, non-regular or contingent workers replace regular-status workers. Moreover, even in Japanese establishments that are doing well, the number of non-regular or contingent employees has increased, indicating a *real change in Japanese employment system*. [28] According to a survey conducted in 1998 by the Joint Labor-Management Commission established at the Japan Productivity Center for Socio-Economic Development, for many companies that replace regular-status workers with contingent workers (that is, which shift from loyalty-based interdependent psychological contract towards the short-term transactional contract) this replacement is likely to exert a very strong negative influence on workplace morale and, consequently, on workplace effectiveness: By this replacement regular-status employees are being forced to reduce their trust in the employer and to question their commitment. [29]

## V、 Consequences of contract transformation for the HR management

From the above-mentioned data concerning German and Japanese companies two issues can be pointed out. From the viewpoint of *social efficiency* it may be concluded that the destruction of the interdependent contract may cause cynicism, mistrust, anxiety, concerns about the future, feelings of loss, and depression [30], and the companies that foster layoffs and replace regular-status employees with contingent workers may run into economic problems because of deteriorated work motivation and low job performance.

In respect to *the creation of employee-based core competencies* another critical problem can be emphasized. As discussed earlier, the central task of the HRM lies in developing and nurturing the characteristics of the firm's human resources that can be hardly imitated by competitors. However, layoffs put employees – and corporate core competencies as well – on the street for

the competition to deploy. [31] The empirical results of the survey conducted by Marr/Steiner/Schloderer in 1998 prove that while many German companies were able to cut their labor costs through dismissals, they could at best partly change their corporate culture or the qualification structure of their HR – and it is precisely these long-term oriented goals that are of fundamental importance for the building of core competencies (Figure 2):



**Figure 2** Do the German companies achieved the goals they pursued by adjusting the personnel capacity? (1995-1998) (Source: Marr/Steiner/Schloderer 1998)

Not only layoffs, but the increasing use of contingent employees which can be observed in both the Japanese and German companies can also be potentially dangerous in strategic terms, and the HRM should handle this process very carefully in order to avoid the threat that the achieved cost reduction will be overcompensated by the disadvantages of eroded innovation capacity and diminished commitment. Therefore, the HR professionals should identify, what employees and what capabilities of them does the company need now and what it will need in the future to compete successfully. Some Japanese companies already started to use contingent workers strategically: Many limited-term contract workers, internal contract workers, and some

dispatch or temporary workers are employed by Japanese firms not to cut costs but primarily to obtain professional skills that are not available within firms. [32]

The focal point of the change of the psychological contract is therefore an amplification of internal HR variety which has to be regulated by the HR managers. What is resulting from these changes is an increasing *stratification* of the corporate HR, i.e. the appearance of many groups of employees with different psychological contracts that differ in terms of the tenure of office, strength of the loyalty, importance of knowledge and skills with regard to the market and organizational needs, etc.

From the international comparisons discussed above it may be finally suggested that the differences between the relational, interdependent psychological contracts in Japanese and German companies and the transactional, market-based contracts in Anglo-Saxon companies will not disappear, at least in the near future. In some sense the occurring changes can be characterized as an 'Americanization' of the psychological contract, but unlike the US, strong collectivistic elements in both German and Japanese cultures and economies seem to *counteract* this change process on the deep level. Therefore, the central challenge for the Japanese and German HR professionals seems to be not the *Either-Or selection* between two diametrical alternatives – 'corporation as a shared-fate community' versus 'corporation as a mercenary troop'. Rather, it seems to be an *Both-And solution* that enables a dynamic integration of different HR strata – people with the transactional contract and people with the relational one - inside of the organizational framework. [33]

Therefore, it becomes necessary to develop *different* systems for selective recruitment, separate training and motivation that should be appropriate for these very different personnel strata and also to bring out new ideas of how to ensure the *cooperation* between them. At German companies, there are now only very few "set screws" available that can be used to carry out this *Both-And* personnel policy [34] and maintain the balance between the different strata. Large Japanese corporations seem also not to have solutions for this problem at the ready. Viewed in connection with the development of core competencies that are critical for knowledge creation and innovation, the following questions may be especially tackled by the HR professionals:

**Table 3** Critical questions that result from the reconceptualization of the psychological contract

How do the employees and executives define and experience the company they are working for (the company as a legal counterpart, as a people association, as an instrument to realize shareholders' interests, etc.)?

For which tasks in the knowledge creation process and the value chain does the company need *relationally oriented 'company men'* and for which – *transactionally oriented 'men of the job'*?

With regard to what knowledge creators should the company use the logic of *ability-insurance* and *loyalty-insurance* (i.e. maintaining the interdependent psychological contract even in the recession time), and to which of its employees can and should the company rather apply the logic of *cost-efficiency*?

How can the company ensure, that the cooperation between the employees with different psychological contracts functions well without producing emotional barriers and mutual antagonism?

By which means can the company create the balance between the competencies of core personnel that are company-specific, and the competencies of peripheral groups that are important only in the specific market situation?

How can the company maintain the commitment of the *'company men'* and develop their capabilities further even in the economic situation when it can't (at least short-term) make use of them (e.g. because of recession)?

What variety, that is what dissimilarity should the remuneration policy generate in order to stimulate the innovation champions without destroying the cooperativeness of the rest of the personnel and the cohesion of the corporate system as whole?

What influence do different remuneration systems (seniority-based, performance-based, etc.) have on the employee-based idiosyncratic innovation capability of the company? What incentives lead to what kind of innovation efforts (rather radical, rather incremental, etc.)?

How much willingness to make sacrifices can the company expect from different groups of employees (e.g. in the sense of corporate-wide wage cutting)?

In contrast to 'dumbsizing', these new problems which have to be solved can inspire the HR professionals as well as the company as a whole, convey to them a sense of creative, meaningful work, and strengthen corporate core competencies in a global innovation-based competition.



## VI、Notes

- [1] Prahalad/Hamel 1990, 1994; Bartmess/Cerny 1993; Bogaert/Martens/van Cauwenbergh 1994; Itami 1987; Rasche/Wolfrum 1994; Stalk/Evans/Shulman 1992; Fliaster 2000
- [2] Rousseau 1995, 1998; Singh 1998; Rousseau/Greller 1994
- [3] Following Fliaster 2000.
- [4] Okubayashi 1993; Narikawa 1997
- [5] Markus/Kitayama 1994a, 1994b
- [6] e.g., Kagitçibasi 1994
- [7] Markus/Kitayama 1991
- [8] Markus/Kitayama 1991 and 1994b; Nakamura 1988; Nonaka/Takeuchi 1995; Fliaster 2000
- [9] Miwa 1994
- [10] e.g., Hamaguchi 1985
- [11] Sullivan/Nonaka 1986
- [12] Fliaster 2000
- [13] Hall/Hall 1990
- [14] Kagono et al. 1985.
- [15] Keizai Kikakuchô 1995
- [16] Chikudate 1997; Miwa 1994
- [17] Marr/Steiner/Schloderer 1998
- [18] Hupe 2001
- [19] DIHK 2001
- [20] Fricke, 2001
- [21] Keizai Kikakuchô 1995
- [22] Japan Times Online, October 18, 2001
- [23] The JIL Labor Flash, Vol. 7, 2001
- [24] The percentages quoted are from a multiple-choice question in which firms were able to tick more than one response JLB, May 2001; for earlier data see Dirks 1997

- [25] The JIL Labor Flash, Vol. 3, 2001
- [26] The JIL Labor Flash, Vol. 2, 2001
- [27] Japan Times Online, January 30, 2002
- [28] Morishima 2001
- [29] Morishima 2001
- [30] e.g., Singh 1998
- [31] Pfeffer 1998
- [32] Morishima, 2001
- [33] Fliaster , 2000
- [34] Sattelberger 1998

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