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# Career Counseling at Japanese Companies and Its Intrinsically Japanese Features: Three Functions Seen in the Context of the Japanese Employment System

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In this study, we collected case examples of utilization of career counseling, with a focus on private-sector companies, and aimed to analyze the current status of career counseling at Japanese companies and its features, including administrative structures, on the basis of these case examples. For the study, we conducted a free-response survey and interview survey (both in March and April 2014). During the free-response survey, 43 career counselors were asked to describe case examples, primarily those that were beneficial to their respective organizations. For the interview survey, career counselors at large companies were interviewed. These surveys found that in-house career counseling at Japanese companies is progressing at a rapid rate, and in particular that such counseling's roles and functions within organizations have been progressively clarified over the past 20 years. In specific terms, career counseling exhibits quintessentially Japanese characteristics, with functions that can be roughly categorized as (a) retention, (b) relational adjustment and dialogue promotion, and (c) imparting of meaning and provision of value.

## 1. Purpose and Methodologies

Currently, in Japan, high expectations are being placed on career counseling within private-sector companies. The most important reason for this is the perception that career counseling, or equivalent forms of support for individual employees, is essential for solving a wide range of problems at Japanese companies.

The mechanisms conventionally employed in Japan for in-house development of human resources are significantly skewed, but it has proved difficult to implement effective countermeasures within companies to correct this. Because the specific issues faced by employees, and the attributes of the employees that face them, are too diverse, it is not feasible to address the challenges at hand with a one-size-fits-all strategy. As a result there is a widespread perception in this country that the only way to deal with individual employees' problems is on an individual basis, through one-on-one discussions or counseling. In Japan today, both companies and other organizations within society are overflowing with such problems that can only be addressed on an individualized basis.

The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) has thus far developed an employment-counseling program involving skilled, specialized counselors who advise people one-on-one.<sup>1</sup> At present, these career counselors are deployed in a wide range of fields,

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<sup>1</sup> In Japanese labor administration these are referred to as "career consultants," a term used virtually synonymously with "career counselor." With regard to the terms "career consulting" and "career

notably at institutions such as public employment service agencies and in schools. The program is considered to have achieved some degree of success. As in other countries, tangible progress is being made on developing a system that makes one-on-one counseling available to workers.

However, the area that has gone most neglected is career counseling at private-sector companies. Frameworks for in-house career counseling (which the MHLW refers to as “career consulting”) are less developed than their counterparts in other kinds of organizations. Going forward, it is necessary to gain a clearer picture of the functions and roles of in-house career counseling programs at companies in order to deliver ongoing policy-based support for the maintenance and improvement of these programs.

Based on the arguments outlined above, for this study, surveys were conducted with the goal of collecting case examples of career counseling implementation, primarily at companies.

In specific terms, we performed two surveys. The first was a free-response survey for which a dedicated website was created, on which career counselors were asked to post about specific cases related to in-house career counseling at companies. The second was an interview survey, for which we spoke with in-house career counselors (both surveys were conducted in March-April 2014).

In the free-response survey, 43 career counselors provided (i) overviews of the companies where they are active primarily as career counselors, (ii) case examples of counseling that proved beneficial for individual employees, and (iii) case examples of counseling that proved beneficial for the organization. Also, they described (iv) obstacles to the dissemination of career counseling at companies, what measures they felt were required to overcome these obstacles, and other perceptions of what was important or necessary from a policy standpoint. For each question, career counselors were asked to give responses of 1,000 Japanese characters or more.

In the interview survey, we spoke with career counselors employed at large companies and freelance counselors working at companies of various sizes. We interviewed a total of around 20 career counselors about 10 case examples from large companies or their subsidiaries, with each interview lasting approximately one and a half hours. In addition to descriptions roughly equivalent to those provided on the free-response survey described above, other information was collected on a wide range of topics including the features of in-house career counseling at companies and how it is implemented at the counselors’ own companies, what abilities are required in order to be a career counselor at a company, and the nature of partnerships and connections with other company departments and in-house programs.

Finally, for this study we viewed the characteristics of career counseling at companies

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counseling,” in the original Japanese text of this article the terms are not differentiated and are used interchangeably throughout. In the descriptions derived from surveyed career counselors, the terminology is left as is. In the English version the term “counseling” is used consistently.

as largely reflecting intrinsically “Japanese-style” qualities, and interpreted and compiled them accordingly. From the many case examples and anecdotes received in the course of this study, it was evident that in-house career counseling at companies in Japan has significantly evolved and deepened over the past 10 to 15 years. The traditional Japanese employment system was seen to exert a moderate influence on these changes.

## **2. In-House Career Counseling at Companies under Western Theories of Career Guidance**

To examine the characteristics of Japanese-style in-house career counseling at companies, let us first look for purposes of comparison at how its counterparts in other countries have been viewed under Western theories of career guidance.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the 2000s in Europe, there was a significant degree of concern with issues that relate to career counseling at companies. However, in Europe, where there is much active discussion on career guidance from the vantage point of public policy, this concern with career counseling at companies took a distinctive form. For one thing, in Europe ideas about public career guidance are fundamentally shaped by strong perceptions about the cost of career guidance, and in an overwhelming majority of cases career guidance is provided through public, and publicly funded, institutions such as public employment service agencies. However, even the most developed countries in Europe are facing severe financial constraints, and as a result there has been considerable focus on how to reduce the burden public career guidance places on public funds. Out of these discussions have come expectations for private-sector companies, in their role as public entities within society, to share some responsibility for delivering career guidance. The more career guidance can be provided through companies, the more public career guidance costs can be reduced. In addition, in-house career counseling at companies can offer support for already employed people, whose issues are generally difficult to approach within the framework of public career guidance.

Although this context would seem to be in line with the high degree of interest in career counseling within companies, in fact, in Europe as well this is the area where the progress of research lags farthest behind. The most important reason for this is that even in the most advanced European countries, only a few of the largest companies are capable of

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<sup>2</sup> Here the term “career guidance” is used as a general term encompassing career consulting, career counseling, vocational counseling, provision of vocational information, and occupational tests and inspections, as well as other forms of vocational and career support for individuals including career development assistance. This definition of “career guidance” follows the one stipulated by the OECD (2004), and seeks to examine career guidance policy throughout society as a whole from a variety of angles by interpreting all vocational and career support within a comprehensive framework. In Europe it is not the norm to single out only career counseling for discussion, but rather to discuss career formation support measures including career counseling comprehensively, and the discussion herein of “European career guidance theory” takes into account this trend in European discourse.

providing sufficient career counseling services to employees. Furthermore, even at these large, leading-edge companies, career counseling has generally been recognized as a program of limited scope for elite professional and technical staff and executive position candidates (OECD 2004). In practice, although expectations for in-house career counseling at companies are high in Europe, it has not been widely implemented, and it appears that only a very few of the largest companies are providing these services to their highly specialized employees.

In Japan, the introduction of career counseling has similarly been restricted to large companies, but here it seems likely that the problem involves lack of widespread recognition of career counseling's effectiveness and importance. By contrast, in Europe the issue appears to be that career counseling is seen as a highly cost-intensive form of career development support, and it is fundamentally not seen as viable for companies of all sizes, from major corporations to small and mid-sized businesses, to offer it to their employees.

Instead, attention has turned toward intermediary groups and organizations such as labor unions, industry groups, and economic organizations. All of these groups are originally intended to contribute broadly to workers, industry associations, and industries in general, transcending the frameworks of single companies, and they share similar traits which make them suitable as providers of career counseling and other counseling services. Moreover, even in cases where it is difficult for a single company to justify the expense of career counseling, when multiple companies join forces they can expect to be able to provide services to a reasonable degree at an affordable cost. While high expectations are placed on in-house career counseling at companies, when its deployment is considered in realistic terms, the tentative conclusion of career guidance theorists in Europe appears to be that intermediary groups and organizations such as labor unions, industry groups, and economic organizations are more capable of delivering counseling services in practice.

### **3. History and Characteristics of Japanese-Style In-House Career Counseling at Companies**

When compared with the status of career counseling at companies in Europe, described in the previous section, it can be said that career counseling has been introduced at Japanese companies and taken hold relatively smoothly compared to the rest of the world. At present, discussions on the matter in Japan are ahead of the global curve in some respects, against a historical backdrop of continuous and cumulative, if gradual, efforts to introduce in-house career counseling at companies since early in the postwar era.

The history goes back to 1954, when the Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Public Corporation (present-day NTT: Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Corporation) introduced a counselor system on a trial basis, followed by Kokusai Denshin Denwa Co. Ltd. (present-day KDDI Corporation) in 1956, and Matsushita Electric Industrial Co., Ltd. (present-day Panasonic Corporation), Meidensha Corporation, Kobe Steel, and others, all of

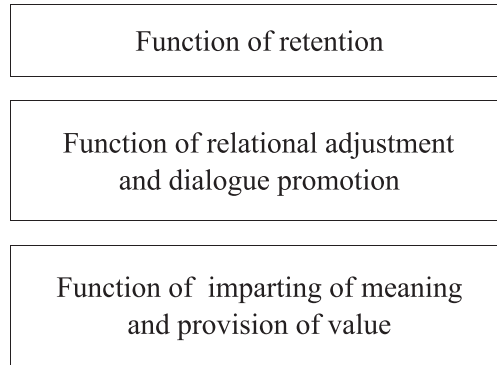


Figure 1. The Three Functions of Japanese-Style Career Counseling at Companies

which introduced in-house career counseling in 1957. Then, in the 1960s, the Ministry of Labour Women's and Minors' Bureau and other agencies issued public documents on "industrial counseling programs," and launched policy-based support with the aim of improving workplace human relations, which were still more or less "feudalistic" at the time. Later, the 1970s saw the gradual growth of a program that integrated a "Career Development Program (CDP)," "Career Development Workshops (CDW)," and "Career Counseling (CC)" in a unique evolution of the American CDP (Career Development Program [CDP]), which eventually took root primarily at large companies. Today, in Japan, a framework for provision of integrated CDP-CDW-CC, as a means of providing career counseling in some form during the training period, has become a basic and widely recognized model for in-house career counseling at companies in Japan. And, since the 1990s, due to the linkage of career counseling with a series of CDP-oriented initiatives such as personnel interviews, management by objective, and an in-house staff recruitment system, there have been ongoing discussions in Japan aimed at boosting the effectiveness of various personnel policies. The pursuit of in-house career counseling for company employees has been a significant feature of the Japanese business environment, and it is valid to say that the perception that companies should make concerted efforts to support their employees' careers is strong in Japan relative to other countries.

Looking back over recent history, it seems highly likely Japanese perceptions of in-house career counseling at companies are closely tied to the business environment and corporate culture generally interpreted as "traditionally Japanese." And in fact, the results of the two surveys conducted for this study point to the characteristics of in-house career counseling at companies that has been cultivated in the Japanese business climate and environment. In the following section, let us examine these Japanese characteristics of in-house career counseling at companies in light of the three functions of "retention," "relational adjustment and dialogue promotion," and "imparting of meaning and provision of value." (Figure 1)

#### 4. The “Retention” Function of In-House Career Counseling at Companies

The first function we will examine is retention, i.e. the role of keeping employees from resigning, and maintaining human resources at the company. Basically, Japanese-style in-house career counseling at companies entails interventional support aimed at preventing people from leaving the company.

For example, as in Case Example 1, we collected a relatively large number of case examples of employees who initially consulted counselors saying they “wanted to consider their future lives and careers, including possibly changing jobs,” but eventually arrived at the conclusion that they would “stay with their current employers, while searching for a workplace environment that suits them.” In this process, employees look back over the past and their own skills and orientations, deepening their self-understanding including their strong points and weak points, and this style of interventional support can be called the most common paradigm for in-house career counseling at companies in Japan.

Case Example 1: Age 35–39, male, major electronics manufacturer, R&D division

- (1) Client felt unable to raise his level of motivation at his current job. He was worried that he was going to keep just drifting along aimlessly, and felt like there must be a job that he would find more rewarding. He wanted to consider his future life and career, including possibly changing jobs.
- (2) Client looked back over his life thus far, not only in terms of his career but also hobbies, personal life, and school days, and thought about what he had done that he found fun, rewarding, and interesting. He looked at what he was good at and what he had had trouble with over the past 13 years at his current job, and thought about the reasons why.
- (3) It became clear to him that his personality made him dislike doing monotonous work and performing repetitive tasks over and over. He was capable of doing it, but he now saw clearly that he had been engaged for quite a few years in this work that didn’t suit him.
- (4) He was not in such mental anguish that he had to leave his present workplace right away, so he decided to stay with his current employer, while searching for a workplace that suited him.

With career counseling, there are rare cases in which the opposite occurs, i.e. companies that are seeking to cut personnel facilitate counseling aimed at outplacement. However, at least as far as the results of this survey are concerned, counseling plays this role in only a limited number of cases, and as a basic rule, one evident characteristic of Japanese-style career counseling at companies is that human resources within the organization are not in-

tentionally ejected from the organization. While cases of outplacement-oriented individualized counseling accompanying personnel reductions are not non-existent, these counseling sessions are generally positioned in a different context and category than that of in-house career counseling. In this regard, it does not seem valid to hastily associate in-house career counseling at companies with outplacement counseling geared toward intentional reduction of human resources.

Thus, while career counselors do in some cases serve to promote labor mobility, it is generally in the opposite direction, i.e. mid-career hiring of personnel from outside the organization, or adaptation of outside personnel to the workplace environment.

For example, in Case Example 2, several years after a mid-career job change, an employee fell into a workplace situation to which she was maladjusted. For a relatively long period of four to five years things went well, but then multiple problems occurred in compound fashion. As a rule, with employees hired mid-career, when it is relatively smooth sailing there are no overt problems, but once problems do occur there are often no in-house human resources capable of resolving them. In other words, the fact that employees joined the company mid-career makes them more susceptible to problems in the first place, and when problems occur they are more difficult to solve due to insufficient workplace relationships and networks. To compensate for this lack, career counselors serve to listen and offer advice. In the following example, it does not state specifically what kind of intentional support the career counselor provided, but we may assume that by basically playing a listening role, the counselor created an atmosphere in which the employee felt comfortable confiding on various topics. As a result, workplace tensions were alleviated.

Case Example 2: Age 30–39, female, hired mid-career five years ago, university graduate, full-time employee

- (1) Employee changed jobs mid-career, having previously worked in a different industry. Although her performance was good for the first few years after joining, her professional growth became sluggish during the fourth and fifth year, and she became isolated in the workplace due to her high level of pride.
- (2) Due to her level of experience and pride in her abilities, she felt unable to ask people for help in resolving difficulties on the job, and confided that she was feeling distressed, dissatisfied with the status quo, and at the same time felt guilty for causing the company trouble, and said she realized that she needed to change herself for the better.
- (3) In the end, while the workplace atmosphere did not become entirely warm and cozy, tensions were alleviated and there was an overall improvement in perceptions and workplace solidarity.

As we have seen, when in-house career counseling at companies is considered from the point of view of labor mobility, counselors can be said to play a key role particularly in terms of accepting personnel into the organization. If we model in-house career counseling, we can postulate three forms of career counseling: career counseling aimed at ejecting human resources from an organization, career counseling that serves to mediate between the organization and employees, and career counseling that serves to receive human resources into an organization from the outside. And today, in-house career counseling at companies in Japan is clearly oriented toward this third, receiving function. In-house career counseling at companies is an internal service, specifically dedicated to delivering counseling services within the organization, and when envisioning the future of Japanese-style career counseling, it is vital to keep this point in mind at all times.

## **5. The “Relational Adjustment and Dialogue Promotion” Function of In-House Career Counseling at Companies**

A second notable feature of Japanese-style in-house career counseling at companies is its “relational adjustment and dialogue promotion” function. When a client, i.e. an employee, has a problem, Japanese in-house career counseling often entails facilitating dialogue with his or her supervisor. Because of counselors’ duty of confidentiality, such dialogues can only take place with the permission of lower-ranked employees who visit them for counseling, but counselors do seek to facilitate direct problem solving through talks with supervisors. Even if such direct dialogues do not occur, at many companies there is an attempt to create some sort of opportunity for communication between supervisors and subordinates. For the lower-ranked employee, i.e. the client, as a general rule counselors provide support aimed at conveying his or her thoughts and feelings to the supervisor effectively. The value systems of people in the workplace have become highly diversified compared to in the past, and mutual understanding between supervisors and subordinates has become more difficult than ever before, creating a need for challenging relational adjustments in the workplace. Reading into past literature, we find that in-house career counseling at companies in Japan has been expected to play the role of human relationship adjustment in the workplace ever since its introduction in the 1950s.

For instance, Case Example 3 cites a classic example of miscommunication between an employee and his supervisor due to discrepancies in perception. The counselor responded by first of all seeking to calm the employee’s emotional reaction and create an atmosphere where interventional support is possible, and then promptly facilitating a discussion with the supervisor in question. At this stage, the counselor offered the employee suggestions on how to talk with the supervisor, what to say, and so forth.



Case Example 3: Age 30–39, male, has difficulty communicating with his supervisor

- (1) Transferred to current department around four years ago. Now, he has been told that he will be transferred again because he is of no use in this department, but he cannot accept this.
- (2) Client became somewhat emotional when discussing dissatisfaction and misgivings about the company and its management, so discussion was suspended for the time being.
- (3) During second counseling session, the client took up where he left off. As he still seemed unable to accept the situation, counselor encouraged him to have a talk with his supervisor, but he strongly rejected the idea.
- (4) Client asked counselor to speak to supervisor on his behalf, so counselor had a talk with the head of the department in question. According to him, the reason for the transfer was not because the employee was of no use, but for other reasons considered from a comprehensive standpoint, such as giving him a chance to reinvigorate himself in a new workplace, expanding the scope of his duties, and addressing a personnel shortage in the department to which he was transferred.
- (5) When the client was informed of these reasons at the third counseling session, he seemed somewhat relieved.

In this study the question of whether the counselor held discussions with the supervisor as well, in addition to counseling the client, was a crucial factor highlighting the role of career counselors at companies. Generally speaking, in Japanese-style in-house career counseling at companies, it is only in a limited number of cases that the counselor's work takes the form of pure "counseling," wholly dedicated to advising and supporting the client, and at present it is more common for the counselor to facilitate a discussion with the supervisor at the request of (or with the permission of) the client. We can point to this as one aspect specific to in-house career counseling at companies in Japan, where the maintenance of harmony within the company is a primary objective.

It should be noted that underlying this relational adjustment and dialogue promotion is a paradigm reversal in which it has become difficult to imbue employees with the organization's objectives in a top-down manner. Employees no longer follow a consistent pattern in recognizing the organization's stated objectives and aligning these with their own future job and career goals. This means that individual employees must consider their "autonomous careers" at all times, but the careers that these employees envision sometimes lead to inconsistencies and conflicts with the reality of the situation, resulting in the need for relational adjustment and dialogue promotion. It should be recognized that the environment in

which employees are expected to have “autonomous careers,” and the relational adjustment and dialogue promotion role of career counseling, are two sides of one coin.

## 6. The “Imparting of Meaning and Provision of Value” Function of In-House Career Counseling at Companies

With regard to Japanese-style in-house career counseling at companies, imparting of meaning and provision of value is another noteworthy function. When employees who work at a company lose sight, for some reason, of the meaning of their work at the company, or their perception of the fundamental value of their work is disrupted, career counseling can help to show meaning from another angle or provide assistance in rethinking value structures. Most in-house career counselors carry out these interventions in the areas of “meaning” and “value” consciously, or based on an implicit understanding. For example, when an employee temporarily loses drive or motivation, or experiences conflicts and stress due to trivial matters, it is generally assumed that the employee’s sense of the meaning and purpose of his or her job has been disrupted, and the counselor intervenes directly to address this. This means that career counseling is often similar to what we usually associate with the word “counseling,” relating directly to psychology, mentality, and perception.

In Case Example 4, the counselor felt that support provided to the client in the previous session was not sufficient, so the counselor took the initiative in contacting the client and offering further assistance. During the next session, the counselor focused on the employee’s sources of motivation and values with regard to work, and delved into her value system. The counselor employed tools and methods that eventually clarified the client’s values with a high degree of effectiveness. As a result, the counseling led to concrete improvements in the employee’s job performance, in the form of a more proactive stance toward work.

### Case Example 4: Female, age 35, married with child(ren)

- (1) Counselor felt support provided in the previous counseling session was not sufficient, and took the initiative in contacting the client and having further discussions.
- (2) By focusing on what the employee’s sources of on-the-job motivation were, the counselor came to a somewhat greater understanding of her values with regard to work, but decided to delve further into her value system in the belief that this would help boost motivation. As a tool, value cards (cards with statements involving values) were employed, with the employee asked to sort the cards (the card-sorting method.)

- (3) Finally, it became clear what values mattered most to the employee. When the values that emerged were written down on paper and handed to the employee, it had a considerable positive impact on her, and she preserved the paper carefully and kept it with her when she left.
- (4) Afterward, she became a more proactive worker. People with peripheral jobs inevitably end up simply doing what is asked of them much of the time, but she adopted a positive, proactive stance even if it appeared to be a menial task.

Interventions in terms of “meaning” and “value” such as this one have recently been particularly emphasized in in-house career counseling at companies in Japan, due to radical changes in the current career environment. These changes can be described using keywords such as information-based, globalization, knowledge-based, and service economy, but the common denominator is that companies themselves face increasing uncertainty about the direction they are headed due to the intensity of external environmental changes. As a result it has become more difficult to give employees a clear picture of what work they should do, and how they should do it, in order to build future careers based on a paradigm of steady growth. Also, even if companies are able to convey such policies and guidelines, on the employee side there is ongoing diversification in terms of employment formats, needs, and values, making it more challenging for employees to align their employers’ stated goals with their own career and life paths. Unlike in the past, when workers could have faith in the lifetime employment system and expect a reasonably stable and predictable career path if they kept working, even without clearcut goals, within the same organization, it is no longer feasible for many workers to continue unquestioningly accepting the “meanings” and “values” propagated by their companies at face value.

In this way, it is simultaneously becoming more difficult for companies to paint a picture of the future for their employees, and becoming more difficult for employees to place themselves firmly in that picture, leading to the emergence of employees who lose sight of the meaning and value of working where they work. An effective response to these broad socioeconomic trends, and the shifts in the career environment that they generate, is what is sought from career counseling today.

## **7. Specific Content of In-House Career Counseling at Companies**

From here on, let us look at specifically what topics are discussed during in-house career counseling at companies of Japan, on the basis of case examples provided during the interview survey.

We focused on what kinds of issues clients brought up during their initial career

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) Changes in assignment of job duties due to transfer or promotion</li> <li>(2) Low motivation</li> <li>(3) Career development</li> <li>(4) Issues faced by women with shortened work hours or fixed-term contracts</li> <li>(5) Mental health-related career issues</li> <li>(6) Other</li> </ol> |
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Figure 2. Topics Discussed during In-House Career Counseling at Companies

counseling sessions. These were classified in six categories, shown in Figure 2. Below, we will examine these categories, quoting from the findings of the interview survey.

### (1) Changes in Content of Job Duties Due to Transfer or Promotion

Changes in content of job duties due to transfer or promotion are often the first issue mentioned by employees who seek in-house career counseling at companies. For instance, there are case examples of people who have lost motivation because they have been assigned to a department that they did not want to go to, or of employees whose physical health or attendance declines because of increased pressure due to promotion. In addition, although these may not be such serious problems, there were case examples of employees who felt ill at ease after a transfer from the sales division to the manufacturing division, or who wanted to self-reflect and transform themselves due to a transfer from business-to-customer to business-to-business sales.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A client was assigned to a department he did not want to be in, and hoped to work on the development side of things, but was reassigned to another department that he did not want to enter. He felt unmotivated and dissatisfied with the nature of the tasks he was given. (Company H)</li> <li>• A client was originally engaged in sales in an industry completely unrelated to the work he is doing now. These sales were primarily business-to-customer. Afterward he was transferred to a business-to-business sales division at his own request. About two years afterward, he volunteered for career training planned by the company, evidently in the hopes of changing and improving himself. (Company E)</li> </ul> |
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### (2) Low Motivation

There were various case examples of employees seeking counseling due to low motivation, not necessarily as a result of changes in content of duties due to transfers or promo-

tions. These included young workers who, after being hired and actually starting to work, experienced lowered motivation because things did not go as they expected, and workers in their late 20s whose motivation fell because their job performance and evaluations by supervisors did not improve. There were various other expressions, from employees seeking counseling, of declining drive and ambition with regard to the job or workplace, including feelings of decreased enjoyment, inability to see oneself as a useful presence, doubts about one's own working style, and distrust of managers or the organization.

These expressions of low motivation are closely tied to case examples of employees bringing up mental health issues claiming to be "a bit exhausted," as well as with case examples of counseling sought by employees desiring career development.

- A client suffered from low levels of motivation. After starting work, the young employee was shocked by the gap between the job as envisioned and the reality of it, and stated that the job was not rewarding and expressed a desire to change jobs. (Company A)
- This client was a man in his late 20s who complained that his efforts went unrecognized. He was constantly moved around to various departments, did not see his performance evaluations rise, and did not feel satisfied with his own performance, and his motivation declined. With his 30th birthday approaching, he felt a sense of crisis, and realized that he needed to make a change and improve his qualifications. However, he was not sure how to go about doing this. (Company B)

### (3) Career Development

Some employees have more positive motives for seeking counseling. These include case examples of a young, late-20s employee who wanted to get an MBA but worked at a company that lacked a program for this purpose, and another who wanted to be transferred overseas and was seeking information. These requests for counseling are not limited to young or mid-level employees, but sometimes involved senior employees who wanted to obtain qualifications or MBAs to enhance their careers. In some cases employees have been preparing beforehand for career development, and in other cases they were seeking advice on whether they should eventually change jobs. There was also a case example of an employee seeking specific advice on starting an independent business. Whether the goal was overseas study, acquisition of certifications, changing jobs, or starting an independent business, it was vital to verify how clear and strongly held the employee's goals were. When these goals were clearly established, counselors provided support aimed at helping them achieve them. In contrast to counseling about problems such as unfamiliar tasks or lack of motivation, where the goal was to boost the employee from a negative position back to zero,

here the goal was to move in a positive direction, which is perhaps the way career counseling is intended to be.

- A young employee in his late 20s had joined the company in a research position, but now wanted to study in the United States and obtain an MBA. However, the company did not have a program enabling people in research positions to pursue MBAs. . . . If the company would not allow it, the employee wanted to study abroad even if it meant quitting. (Company F)
- The client was in his 20s or 30s. Currently employed in the research department, the employee eventually wanted to work overseas, and outlined his thoughts on the matter. The employee had spoken with a supervisor, but wanted to speak with someone else as well and thus had come for counseling. (Company D)

#### (4) Issues Faced by Women with Shortened Work Hours or Fixed-Term Contracts

There are topics for which female employees in particular seek counseling. These include cases where professional competency fails to advance because employees are transferred to different departments or positions due to maternity or childcare leave, or cases regarding changes in work location due to marriage. In addition, a relatively sizable number of case examples were received regarding women with shortened working hours, who were unable to accomplish what they wanted at work, or who felt they were not performing adequately at work, due to time constraints. Similar case examples were seen among female employees with fixed-term contracts.

Female employee, approximately 35 years old, with child(ren)

- Employee had stayed at her job by utilizing the maternity leave and childcare leave programs, but each time she returned to work she was assigned to different departments and given different duties, and sought counseling because she felt this stifled her professional growth. (Ms. I)
- There was a woman with shortened working hours, and the company recognized her latent potential and wanted to uphold her as a role model, but she was unable to answer these expectations adequately due to time constraints. (Company H)

#### (5) Mental Health-Related Career Issues

Case examples of clients suffering mental health-related career problems were among the most numerous. It was evident that employees often sought counseling not with regard

to mental health issues per se, but at the stage when symptoms are just emerging, or on when the impact of these issues on workplace or career becomes evident on reinstatement after leave of absence.

For example, in cases of clients afflicted with depression who seek counseling at the suggestion of a supervisor, even if the depression itself has improved and the client has been able to return to work on a trial basis in preparation for full-scale reinstatement, it is not always possible to return smoothly to work. In the process, a variety of minor problems can occur, and it is necessary to address them. In particular, there are many cases where some sort of trouble in the workplace is what led to the mental health issues in the first place, and employees sometimes seek counseling regarding the reasons that led to the leave of absence.

In other cases, when an employee is diagnosed with panic disorder and some sort of measures in the workplace are called for, while diagnosis of the condition itself is carried out by a health care professional such as an occupational health physician, it is the career counselor who can more smoothly judge who in the workplace should be advised on the matter and what measures should be taken. In this manner, there are many case examples where more than dealing with mental health problems in and of themselves, counselors address workplace issues ancillary to the mental health problems that arise. This point is worthy of particular emphasis.

- A supervisor consulted the counselor regarding a subordinate suffering from depression, who had returned to work on a trial basis in preparation for reinstatement, but to the supervisor the employee's attitude toward work did not indicate readiness to return. He had a somewhat bizarre way of dressing, etc. and did not appear serious. At the request of the supervisor, the subordinate came to speak with the counselor who played the role of career advisor. (Mr. I)
- A male employee in his early 50s, who was engaged in sales in a business operations division at the head office, consulted a counselor. About six months before he had fallen ill due to overly strenuous work, but returned to work after a one-month leave of absence. However, at that time he was removed somewhat from the front lines of the company's sales division. (Company D)

Conventionally, in Japan, it has been argued that career counseling should not deal specifically with mental health issues, and should focus exclusively on career issues. Today, however, it has become common practice to provide at least a certain level of support in this regard to clients who consult a section of the company that offers career counseling, and

then to outsource the handling of mental health-related issues to other entities inside or outside the company as needed. For this reason, even personnel who are specifically in charge of career counseling need to have the expertise and skills to assist clients with mental health issues. In the interview survey conducted for this study, there were many case examples of career counselors who partnered with other staff engaged in health care management. As long as workers are suffering from mental health problems, it is necessary to have sufficient knowledge to deal with these problems in order to resolve the associated workplace issues. A crucial if latent issue is lurking, in that simply being an expert on workplace and labor issues is not sufficient qualification for a career counselor.

#### (6) Other

There were other case examples of clients who required counseling accompanying the implementation of various in-house career development assistance-related measures. In other cases, counseling was related to outplacement services closely coordinated with human resources department policies.

- The company has a program for which employees can apply for transfers and promotions, but there are questions about how to care for employees who pass the screening and interview and transfer to a different workplace only to have things not go well, or how to counsel people who do not pass it. . . . The client in this case example is 40 years old. He always fails in the document review and has never gotten to the interview stage, but he applies again and again. (Company E)
- There was a case example of counseling for outplacement. The client was an engineer who was constantly being blamed and criticized by people at the company's trading partners, and remained in a constantly depressed state. His recovery did not make progress and he could not stay in the same position for years on end in an unstable state, so outplacement was required. (Company C)

### 8. Summary

In this article, we have explored the intrinsically Japanese characteristics of in-house career counseling at companies in Japan, categorizing its three primary functions as “retention,” “relational adjustment and dialogue promotion,” and “imparting of meaning and provision of value.” As to the question of why in-house career counseling at companies in Japan can be implemented relatively smoothly as long as these three functions are fulfilled, we may arrive at one viable hypothesis: that the so-called Japanese-style employment sys-



tem has, by its very nature, provided favorable conditions for the establishment of in-house career counseling at Japanese companies.

Here the “Japanese-style employment system” is seen as entailing long-term employment, a seniority-based wage system, and relatively low labor mobility as an outgrowth of these first two traits. At large companies that maintain this traditional Japanese employment system, if there is a high rate of turnover, it is disadvantageous for both the employees and the company itself. For employees, changing jobs and leaving the company generally means lower wages and reductions in benefits. Meanwhile, for the company, it is not profitable to let an employee simply slip away, as it will lose the costs incurred in hiring the employee, the specialized skills the employee has accumulated within the company, and the employee’s loyalty to the company. Therefore, career counselors who are employed by the company and dedicated to providing services to individual employees keep in mind the goal of retention, which benefits both employees and the organization.

Also, large companies that maintain the traditional Japanese employment system encompass a very wide range of occupations, when their subsidiaries and affiliates are taken into account, and there is practically guaranteed to be some way of making effective use of a given employee without ejecting him/her from the organization. A full lineup of career formation support programs is often in place, and by utilizing these programs effectively, an employee should be able to build an acceptable career without leaving the company. Therefore, even if relationships with supervisors and co-workers are poor for some length of time, it is not necessarily a reason to leave the company altogether. Encouraging improved relations and promoting dialogue with supervisors and co-workers is generally more beneficial for both employees and the company.

In addition, for much the same reason, when employees temporarily lose sight of the meaning and value of their work, it is not a reason to rush to encourage them to seek a position elsewhere. As long as there are varied and generous in-house support programs, and a wide range of jobs and occupations within the company, employees can regain their grasp of the meaning and value of work through appropriate interventional support from a career counselor, and can continue to work in a different position or format. Even if one has temporarily lost a sense of meaning and value in the current workplace, it does not mean one should immediately seek meaning and value elsewhere. In-house career counselors are often engaged in providing follow-up support to employees who suffer from mental health issues, following the medical support services provided by health management staff, with counseling aimed at rebuilding a sense of meaning and value in work.

In-house counseling of this kind requires an organization with an internal labor market large and varied enough to enable changes to job and occupation via transfer to other sections of the company or corporate group. It also requires a variety of mechanisms to support this internal labor market, particularly a well-developed career formation support program. If these conditions are not in place, career counselors at companies will not be able to function at full capacity. This means that small and medium-sized companies have

trouble introducing career counseling, not only due to the prohibitive expense, but also because the conditions required for career counselors to work effectively cannot be put in place.

For in-house career counseling at companies to be practiced effectively in Japan, there are a range of prerequisites including Japan's unique employment system, the large scale of internal labor markets at major companies that grows out of this system, and the career formation support programs that enable these internal labor markets to function. With regard to the connections between in-house career counseling at Japanese companies and the Japanese-style employment system, in addition to the factors pointed out here, there are other factors that could be enumerated, such as Japan's generous system of social welfare, the strong concentration of human-resources authority in companies' head offices (meaning that the authority of employees' direct supervisors is relatively weak), and strict regulations governing dismissal of employees.