
Introduction

Managers in Japan

Management staff roles are positions that are intermediately situated between top executives and regular employees, such as that of section manager, department manager, or section supervisor. In Japan's employment system, which has assumed a system for internal promotions under the traditional practice of lifetime employment, producing results as a manager is an essential step toward the realization of future job promotions for middle-aged employees. The current issue takes such managers as its focus.

First, according to the article by Itoh and Moriya, middle management faces a tradeoff which they call the "middle manager's dilemma." The top executives ask that middle managers report to them about what is actually happening in the work place and suggest the relevant decisions to be made; however, if members of middle management actually do communicate all such information perfectly, they will end up being thought of by their subordinates as bosses who are only trying to gauge the feelings of the top levels of management, which could possibly damage the subordinates' motivation. As such, there is a tradeoff between a middle manager's function as a communicator and his/her subordinates' incentive to take the initiative. One ironic consequence is that job performance is actually sometimes better when the management staff is not there, but Itoh and Moriya's article analyzes this as originating from the fact that middle managers' over-sharing of information has damaged such an incentive in their subordinates.

Japan's middle management is often caught in the middle between their superiors and their subordinates, and this article gives a theoretical explanation of this point through its clarification of the relationships in the above-mentioned tradeoff.

As previously stated, managers in Japan are promoted from the level of rank-and-file employees. While they are in the rank-and-file, employees gain experience in a variety of positions through staff reshuffling, and it is generally believed that those who have comprehensive decision-making skills are the ones who are appointed to management positions. Whether this thinking is actually correct and how management skills are formed are two questions that Uchida's article has set forth to clarify.

For his article, Uchida interviewed 22 subjects who were candidates for next-generation executive management positions at an electrical machinery manufacturer, investigated the contents of the most essential skills they had learned and acquired in their careers and the opportunities for that acquisition, and analyzed the results. According to this analysis, although the company had adopted a wide career system as indicated by the intellectual skills theory, the executive candidates had gained competency in areas such as "organizational management," "knowledge on one's enterprise," "knowledge on the strengths and weaknesses of one's enterprise," and "development of confidence and networks," which are not limited to one professional function.

Employees gain these types of competencies by identifying the differences among professional duties through transfers, and build upon them by comparing these differences. While the intellectual skills theory assumes that in a wide career system, experience in a variety of duties within a single professional function will raise an employee's ability to cope with uncertainties in that specific function, Uchida's article suggests the hypothesis that multiple skill-sets are being learned under this system as well, such as competency in comparison-based analogical reasoning, which is being demanded at non-function-specific executive management levels. While we must wait for further investigations to be completed to find out how valid this hypothesis is, Uchida's article draws attention as one that foreshadows a novel development in the intellectual skills theory.

When a manager is recognized as having reached the position of a supervisor or manager under the law, he/she is excluded from having regulations on working hours and days off applied to him/her (Labor Standards Act, Article 41, Item [ii]). The reason for granting this exclusion is that such employees have a great amount of discretion in their own working hours, and because it is not appropriate for them to be subject to legal regulations. However, could it be possible that this exclusion is appropriate for most of the managers in Japan?

Ogura investigates this point in his article, using microdata from the Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training, and analyzes the results. This article, in an exploration into the causes impacting the length of management staff members' working hours and the size of their workloads, found that the mean value of the working hours at the section manager and department manager levels was longer in comparison to that of rank-and-file employees. Additionally, the freedom to decide their own office arrival and departure times had no influence on the size of their workloads. Whether or not they had the freedom to decide their office arrival and departure times, many of the managers worked long hours, and it was Ogura's conclusion that even if they were exempt from the application of regulations on working hours as supervisors or managers, it could be conjectured that this had no actual meaning in the sense of autonomous selection of the length (shortness) of their working hours.

Ouchi's article studies the legal side of this topic. In this article, Ouchi introduces judicial precedents, theory, and administrative notifications, in addition to examining the issue of "supervisors and managers" in legal term—which has been brought to society's attention by the problems surrounding so-called "nominal supervisors and managers"—from both the interpretive and legislative sides.

One particularly essential point this article underlines is that, in regard to members of management whom Japanese companies have excluded from application of regulations on working hours as people who fall under the category of "supervisors and managers," in the majority of cases where such people have brought actions to claim increased wages for overtime work alleging that they are not supervisors or managers in legal term, the court denies that they have the qualities of a supervisor or manager. As Ogura's article also indi-

cates, managers in Japan have long working hours, and in the way that they work, the difference between managers and regular employees is often unclear. As such, it is only natural that a manager might not fall under the category of a supervisor or manager under the Labor Standards Act.

Ouchi's article points out that, although one of the causes of this state of affairs is the fact that companies, with the aim of saving labor costs, are increasing the ranks of nominal managers who are without the authority and duties associated with the true status of manager, the laws that fail to clarify standard criteria for the qualities of "supervisors and managers" are also at its origin.

Some attempts at revision have been made to the regulations on working hours, which were originally constructed with factory workers in mind, due to increases in the number of white collar workers. However, the discrepancy between the regulations on working hours under existing laws and the actual state of affairs at business enterprises has become so large that it cannot be properly handled by these revisions alone. What we need now is to fundamentally rethink these regulations on working hours, and within this, to apply the appropriate revisions to the system that excludes "supervisors and managers" from their application.

Managers are given essential roles in their companies' decision-making processes. What the current issue deals with is only a small part of the point in question, which is such an essential one in the field of studies on management staff. Allow me to close this introduction with a reminder that there are other important points, such as the way a manager's remuneration is decided and the nature of the mechanism by which managers compete for promotions, that are still to be taken up in regard to this topic.

Shinya Ouchi
Kobe University