

Chapter 8: Analysis of the Free Comments

Introduction

At the end of our survey form is an item which reads “Are there any thoughts or opinions you can share with us on problems or concerns about your work and life in Japan?” Out of 307 valid response forms, 55 had the free comment space filled in, yielding a rather high response rate of 17.7%. We will therefore supplement the analysis of the responses that we carried out in the first seven chapters by analyzing the unvarnished opinions written in the free comment space.

The comments covered many areas, but they may be discussed in terms of 7 basic categories: 1) concerns about the dispatching organization (company headquarters), 2) concerns about the local organization and work, 3) concerns about daily life, 4) concerns about language and communication, 5) concerns about government procedures, 6) concerns about repatriation, and 7) other concerns and opinions. In general, the comments seemed to be limited to concerns about Japan. No one mentioned pre-departure training, prior notification of assignment to Japan, the assignment period, compensation, or such matters as public peace.

The notations within parentheses indicate the respondent’s nationality, age, and number of years in Japan. All the respondents who made comments were male.

1. Concerns about the Dispatching Organization or Company Headquarters

One issue that cannot be avoided in multinational corporations is disagreements between the company headquarters and the overseas subsidiaries. As one respondent said, “Head office is not willing or prepared to embrace the current business culture in Japan. This promotes frustration and conflict between the two parties.” (Australian, age 52, 3 years) Expatriates thus suffer from being caught between the headquarters and the local organization.

Support from headquarters is essential for expatriates. As one respondent pointed out in his free comments, “Support of human resources organization at a corporate level is crucial to successful performance in an expatriate assignment.” (American, age 30, 2 years)

However, problems in fact arise, and a typical example is this one concerning the details of everyday life, showing how support from headquarters needs to be both individualized and specific. “HR support is very poor. Pay is not updated correctly and is not paid to correct account. Some relocation costs are owing to me. No advice given on tax, saving, bill paying, bank account opening, and insurance for life. Very little relocation support offered to wife, children or myself. Nearly everything is difficult from filling the gas cylinder on the BBQ to finding quality

furniture. Our apartment is large adv. expensive. but the quality is poor, the bathrooms are small and the Western kitchen is pathetic in design & features. Despite the space there is no laundry. Support for my son left in Australia is zero and nothing offered.” (Australian, age 41, 6 months).

2. Concerns about the Local Organization and Work

(1) Concerns about Japanese corporate management

The overall impression is that Japanese corporate management is lacking in independent initiative and that both organizations and markets reject that which is foreign.

One respondent listed his concerns as follows: “1. High training costs 2. Seniority system/inflexibility/lack of initiative 3. Still disadvantage to be ‘foreigner/foreign supplier’ 4. Japan-only standards, protectionism.” (German, age 40, 1 year and 3 months) Said another, “Foreigners seem to be not liked much as advisers in Japanese (companies) board rooms.” (Australian, age 53, 7 years) “Japan is a market difficult to access which makes Japan a clear non-priority for head-office.” (French, age 32, 2 years and 2 months)

Furthermore, we also saw criticisms of a strong tendency to avoid change in the current era when changes are required. “Trying to introduce change into our company to be more efficient is very difficult for Japanese to accept. Staff is more comfortable with historical & outdated work habits. I am advised that this is a cultural issue (for example ‘this is the way it is done in Japan’) & is quite common, however with patience, we are making progress. ‘change management’ takes much longer to introduce in Japan than other countries.” (Australian, age 55, 1 year)

(2) Patterns of Decision Making

It is well understood that “The key on my overseas assignments are: 1. When in x do as x people do. 2. Get to know the language.” (British, age 57, 15 years and 2 months) However, this same respondent continues, “This is difficult in Japan. (kanji, etc.)” Thus, as another respondent says, “It takes time to understand the problem solving methods and decision making methods of Japanese companies and technicians, etc. I guess it will be difficult to be the real boss for a big group of Japanese.” (Danish, age 64, 5 years)

It seems to be the case that expatriates have quite a hard time adjusting to Japanese decision making methods. “Reverse culture shock. Traditional Japanese labor practices still exist and are in many ways opposite from Western management practices and culture, i.e.. Top down (western) versus bottom up lines of authority.” (American, age 33, 6 years)

(3) Relations with Colleagues in the Workplace

Communication is the major difficulty in relations with colleagues in the workplace. If these relations do not go well, an uncooperative attitude can develop. “Problems with Japanese colleagues. No communication with expats. Unwillingness to cooperate.” (Swedish, age 40, 3 years and 6 months)

Expatriates are also dissatisfied with not being acknowledged as team members. “It is difficult to become ‘accepted’ as a part of the ‘Team’ in Japan.” (Canadian, age 45, 4 months) “Concerns are for staff who will work within a Japanese team: decision making process, information policy of Japanese managers, management of ‘nemawashi’ (maneuvering behind the scenes).” (Swiss, age 36, 3 years and 4 months)

(4) Concerns about Working Hours

One respondent made the following point about long working hours. “Japanese work hours are very long each day (past 7 or 8 pm). What about a balance between work and family life?” (American, age 32, 7 months)

In extreme cases, this even leads to doubts about whether the labor laws are being observed. “I feel that labor legislation (such as working hours) is not respected by most of Japanese companies, Japan will make great cultural & economical progress if the regulations are fully implemented.” (French, age 56, 2 years and 6 months)

Even if this is an extreme opinion, we can see from the following comment that overseas assignments can be arduous. “It’s great to be in Japan (a country I love) though my work load prevents me from taking full advantage of it—My position gives me stress , not Japan.” (Canadian, age 34, 1 year and 4 months)

3. Concerns about Daily Life

(1) Children and Recreational Facilities

Bringing one’s children to Japan inevitably leads to a variety of problems with daily life. “We have encountered many difficulties living together with 2 small kids; traveling, shopping, kindergarten etc.” (Finnish, age 34, 3 years and 6 months) As this respondent points out, the younger the children, the more problems arise.

Several respondents mentioned the lack of facilities where children could relax and play. “My major complaint about living in Japan is that there are inadequate outdoor recreational facilities (parks, basketball courts, tennis courts, etc.) nearby to the children. This causes the quality of life here to be much lower (for the children) than it would be at home in the USA.” (American, age 43, 2 years and 5 months)

The lack of recreational facilities is a problem not only for children but also for adults. “Believe that recreational facilities in Japan are very lacking and excessively expensive. This is particularly true for various sporting activities such as golf, tennis, softball, etc.” (Canadian, age 52, 2 years and 6 months)

This dissatisfaction is not limited to the tangible aspects of life. “Japan needs more recreational facilities. In addition, the introduction of summer time would make life so much more enjoyable.” (Canadian, age 39, 14 years)

(2) Concerns about Spouses

Concerns about accompanying spouses are inevitable in an overseas assignment, because the expatriate has a specific mission, and the spouse does not. In many cases, they are far away from relatives and friends and forced to live a lonely life. “Life in Japan is much more difficult for my spouse than for me. I spend longer hours working, and she has fewer friends and less ability/mobility to pursue interests than in home country. I believe this is a very common problem.” (American, age 48, 4 years and 1 month)

Furthermore, even more complicated problems arise when the spouse wants to continue working, as shown by the following comment. “I enjoy very much my stay in Japan, work and privately. However for spouse life has been somewhat difficult as she wishes to work (she is psychologist).” (Swedish, age 53, 6 years)

(3) General Concerns about Daily Life, such as Transportation, Medical Care, Prices, and Housing

A typical comment was “Generally positive: culture, food, safety, politeness, matsuri. General problems: price level, especially strong yen/euro too high, too crowded, especially subways.” (Swedish, age 40, 3 years and 6 months) Another respondent listed, “1. Cost of living; transportation difficulties 2. Health system (language problem)” (German, age 40, 1 year and 3 months). Another opinion was, “No real problems. A great place to live and work, but very expensive and a long way from home.” (American, age 55, 3 years and 10 months) Still another lamented, “Daily life too expensive in Japan. Travels inside Japan too expensive, which is a pity.” (French, age 32, 2 years and 2 months)

One respondent flatly stated that “Medical system is of poor standard.” (Danish, age 30, 4 years), but more specifically, one of them said, “We need more hospitals who could handle foreigners’ medical needs. (English Language. Qualified doctors/nurses)” (Filipino, age 47, 9 years and 4 months). A similar point was made about transportation facilities. “A little more English usage in transportation system. Shopping in Japan would make life more pleasant.” (Indian, age 48, 2 years and 2 months) If it comes to this, we can also agree with the comment that, “Knowledge of Japanese language is a pre-condition to a fully satisfactory life in Japan.” (Danish, age 60, 3 years and 3 months)

Housing concerns have become a particularly major issue. Japan “is a difficult place for family. Accommodation is small.” (British, age 33, 2 years and 6 months). “Housing situation in Japan is bad.” (German, age 42, 4 years). Yet this is not a problem unique to expatriates.

(4) Concerns about Education

Encountering problems with children’s education during one’s assignment is the same everywhere. As one British expatriate mentioned, “The British school does not cover the whole age range of my children.” (British, age 38, 1 year and 6 months)

(5) Social Guarantees

Respondents made the following comments about social guarantees and all types of social insurance. “The biggest problem for new companies to Japan is the social security issue. Even in a fortunate situation (Japan/Germany) where a treaty on retirement insurance exist, this does not apply to the many representative offices here in Japan. Measures: 1. Expats (with unlimited contract) of representative offices should be allowed to join the Japanese retirement (pension) system: 2. More information is necessary on jobless-insurance, health insurance, accident insurance and the new daycare insurance.” (German, age 35, 6 months)

4. Language and Communication

In some cases, Japanese attitudes towards foreigners hinder mutual understanding. “Long-term the biggest issue being an expatriate in Japan is the very strong distinctions which still exist between Nihon-jin and Gaijin. Associated with this is an insuperable alienation which never goes away, despite the politeness of the Japanese people.” (British, age 42, 2 years and 5 months)

No matter what one says, the major obstacle hindering this kind of meeting of minds is “Language problems (own and skills of Japanese for English)” (German, age 40, 1 year and 3 months). English or Japanese language ability is essential. The English ability of Japanese people was mentioned several times. “The major (only) problem in living in Japan is almost complete lack of English speaking Japanese people when it comes to everyday life.” (Finnish, age 48, 1 year). “Japan, a nice country. Japanese, friendly people. Japanese standards are good. The main problem in Japan is communications. Very few master a foreign language.” (Swedish, age 55, 5 years) “I am of the view that society may have to encourage reading ‘English’ as a link language in order to have a smooth and hassle-free environment for outsiders, i.e., foreigners who visit Japan. Because of language restrictions, non-Japanese speaking persons are unable to move freely and enjoy the richness of Japanese culture, social environment and other potential values.”

(Indian, age 53, 3 months) We also received the following suggestion, “Improve English ability of Japanese from school by (1) Not using Katakana (2) Utilizing native English teachers. (3) Invest in infrastructure & training.”(British, age 44, 9 years and 2 months)

Certainly, there are also expatriates who are skilled in Japanese. “Just for your information: This is my 4th assignment in Japan. Before the present one I came 3 times for another company. I learned Japanese 15 years ago. My wife is Japanese.” (French, age 52, 2 years)

However, learning Japanese requires quite a bit of time and effort. For that reason, we need to set up opportunities and institutions for language study and information about them. In fact, we find the following kinds of problems. “All in all, I’m satisfied with work conditions and environment in Kobe (information services & other facilities) except one which is Japanese language institution private or public for foreigner who want to study continuously. Around Kobe area, YMCA only provides Japanese language lesson which can not accommodate all foreigners who want to learn. Mastering language is the best way to adapt oneself to the foreign countries.” (South Korean, age 33, 2 months) “I want to learn Japanese language and its culture, but I do not know a good teacher.” (Swiss, age 53, 1 year)

5. Concerns about Government Procedures

In many cases, dealing with a foreign government’s unaccustomed procedures requires a great deal of time and effort. But the problem is much more difficult in Japan than in other countries. We cannot tell whether the following comment represents unusually difficult circumstances, but it is a typical point of dissatisfaction for expatriates. “Very difficult to “figure out” some processes — for example getting a Japanese drivers license took 1 day off from work.” (American age 38, 1 year and 1 month)

For instance, expatriates mentioned the following kinds of dissatisfactions with government institutions, especially the Immigration Office, which they have to visit frequently to apply for immigration inspections and the like. “Passive aggressive behaviour of Japanese government officials at immigration, local government offices, etc. Discrimination/racism at banks, telephone companies, and housing agencies.” (British, age 30, 3 years) “Very bureaucratic to receive VISA for family (VISA, reentry permit, certificate of eligibility, alien registration card etc.)” (German, age 31, 1 year and 8 months)

The following suggestion is worth considering. “To simplify official registration document such as alien card/working permit/driving license/ ... i.e. to avoid annual renewal. These documents to be adapted to expiry date of working contract. To have more administrative support in English.” (French, age 43, 4 years and 7 months)

6. Concerns about Repatriation

Japanese expatriates are not the only ones worried about how they will be treated after repatriation. Expatriates dispatched to Japan have similar anxieties and worries. “The dispatching organization was not yet an international culture. Accordingly, experience abroad is not really valuable.” (French, age 53, 4 years and 3 months) “Japan has the second largest economy in the world but in many ways it is not in the ‘main stream’ in the same way that English speaking or European countries are. This may make it difficult to get a job at home or overseas based on my Japanese experience. Otherwise, this is a great country to live and work in.” (British, age 45, 8 years) “Future roles after Japan are difficult.” (British, age 33, 2 years and 6 months)

Some respondents plan to retire after the completion of their assignment. “I plan to retire upon completion of my assignment in Japan.” (British, age 55, 3 years and 8 months). Furthermore, more than a few people plan not to be repatriated at all but to take a new job in Japan. One of them described the situation as follows: “This form takes no account of people changing jobs while in Japan. Many people take new jobs while remaining in the same basic industry.” (British, age 47, 8 years and 5 months)

7. Other Concerns and Opinions

Many more opinions were expressed other than those described above. First, an employee of an automobile company had the following things to say about Japanese driving habits. “Lack of awareness by motorists on safety driving and general consideration for others.” (British, age 49, 11 years and 5 months)

There were also opinions about Japan’s tax system. “Require to lighten withholding income tax.” (Chinese, age 33, 4 years)

Some expatriates praised their stay in Japan as “Everything is fine,” (French, age 48, 1 year and 8 months), but ironically, others fear that life in Japan is so pleasant that they won’t be able to leave. “I have spend almost eight years working in Japan for different employers. I fear not being able to find a new job not related to Japan and/or the Far East. At some point I would like to stop my ‘Japan dependency’.” (Danish, age 39, 3 years and 11 months)

8. Summary

As seen above, the candid comments of foreign expatriates have truly pointed out a variety of concerns and opinions. It is extremely interesting that no one mentioned problems with the term of the assignment or the location, something that Japanese expatriates often mention.

Conversely, frequently mentioned items included problems with the vagueness of decision making procedures in Japanese companies and organizations, highly intensive working conditions, communication problems, and language learning problems, as well as all sorts of concerns about daily life. Furthermore, we also got a clear picture of their wishes concerning the Immigration Office and other government institutions.