Articles

Origins and Future of Seniority-based and Performance-based Evaluation and Wage Systems in Japanese Companies

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Abstract

In this paper I reviewed and tried to simplify the changes in the personnel systems in Japanese companies, with particular focus on their psychological aspects. Finally, it considers how these systems will change in the future. After the end of the Second World War, many companies separated and clarified elements for evaluating job performance from the evaluation for the overall salary, which was provided as a living wage, but subsequently, the operation of personnel systems that considered both the living wage curve and the maturity curve was mainstream. This consistency from a psychological view with Maslow's hierarchy of needs was often cited. Following that, measuring through performance approval to what extent each employee was able to achieve his specific objectives was attempted with the introduction of management by objectives. In psychological terms, achievement goal theory served as the premise for this. Moreover, achievement motivation and a spirit of challenge were emphasized. After that, with the introduction of performance-based systems, an increasing number of companies incorporated management by objectives in their system for treating employees together with a transition from an ability-based grade system to job evaluation. From now, with teleworking becoming more central, the mere-exposure effect will decline, and disparities in communication inside and outside the company will lessen. The relationship between work itself, which has traditionally made time management its basis, and its reward will collapse. It is surmised that the relationship between the company and the employee will turn to something close to a

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contractual relationship, which focuses more on performance and results.

Keywords: Personnel system, Maslow, a living wage, seniority-based wages, ability-based grade, management by objectives, performance-based wages

1. Introduction: Generalization of the problems and analytical perspectives

Aim

The aim of this paper is to look back at the overall changes characterizing the transitions in the personnel system of Japanese companies in the respective post-war eras as they re-established themselves after the Second World War by simplifying and generalizing the concrete measures many companies took. In particular, the focus will be on the psychological aspects of these changes.

Accordingly, this paper will consider what changes have been accepted in the personnel systems and what have not. Even when companies tried to change their seniority-based systems, these changes gradually reverted to the operation of seniority-based practices. Moreover, although they introduced subsequent systems as they tried to change their practices, these systems again successively reverted to seniority-based management.

Generalization of the problems and analytical perspectives

In this paper, the overall changes in the post-war personnel practices are divided into three stages. The first stage saw the introduction of an ability-based grade system to replace post-war seniority-based practices that were characterized by the priority of providing a living wage. The second stage was the introduction of management by objectives. The third stage was the introduction of performance-based systems.

I will add analysis from psychological viewpoints for each of these stages. I will also postulate from a psychological perspective reasons why these various systems that were introduced did not work as intended, as well as offer analysis of the psychological theories that were the premises for the introduction of new systems.

Finally, I will consider future trends that may develop by taking into account the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Introduction of seniority-based and ability-based grade systems

Overview

After World War II, until the introduction of ability-based grade systems, companies based their personnel evaluations on the employee's length of service at the company and job performance.[1] The evaluation factors were character, skill, work performance, educational background, length of service, and so on. The employee's grade would be rated considering these factors.

At some companies, remuneration comprised the main salary, temporary allowances, incentive payments, and a family allowance. The main salary was decided by the criteria for the assessment of salary increases; however, the decision method and standards were often ambiguous. Wages were determined mainly by length of service. The reasons for this were the company's workplace practices and labor union wage regulatory power, which meant that wages naturally tended to be determined by standardization by age.[2] Personnel decisions were strongly marked by near automatic and sequential promotions in line with the employee's length of service.

At this point, companies wanted to generally evaluate their workers, but problems arose because they could not accurately evaluate their employees since evaluation standards were not clear. The reasons for this will later be analyzed under the heading "psychological aspects and their impact."

Moves to try to evaluate company employees gained momentum from the second half of the 1960s to the first half of the 1970s as major companies adopted ability-based meritocratic management practices. From the mid-1970s after the first oil shock, this ability-based personnel management widely spread at least in form.[3]

For this, an ability-based grading system was used. Employees were rated according to the level of their job performance. By the basing of the main salary on seniority and the separation of that criterion from ability-based grading as assessment standards for additional allowances and wages, companies made clear that the amount of additional wages corresponded to job performance.[4] Companies thus tried to clarify the evaluation of ability through this ability-based grading system.

However, for salaries overall, the comprehensive consideration of the living wage curve and the maturity curve was maintained. As a whole, it was a mixed type of system that included seniority-based wages.[5] However, as a measure for dealing with the natural increase in labor costs accompanying the aging of the workforce, an increasing number of companies stopped regular salary increases for workers reaching the standard age of 45 or 50 and older. Although different from the original intention, in practice, the evaluation itself of job performance considered seniority.

Psychological aspects and their impact

Japan's personnel system during this stage of the seniority-based and ability-based grading systems largely conformed to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1954).[6]

After Japan's defeat in the Second World War, Japanese industry was near collapse, and many people in cities took shelter against the elements in shacks called "barracks." It was difficult even to obtain food. Rice and other staple foods were provided through a distribution system, but that distribution was often stalled, and people were forced to buy daily supplies illicitly at black markets, which sprang up as a matter of course in many areas. Under this situation, what was of greater concern than anything else for people was the securing of foodstuffs and shelter. In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, this was the stage where people were focused on meeting their physiological needs. In this period immediately after WWII, people needed to ensure the conditions for obtaining food, clothing, and shelter through the gaining of employment. At first, the prime need was being able to eat; next was securing a stable life.

According to Maslow, people seek the fulfillment of their physiological needs, next their safety needs, followed by their love and belonging needs, then their esteem needs, and finally their self-actualization needs, in that order.

In the chaotic post-war society, obtaining food was the initial main priority. In order to meet Maslow's physiological needs, people worked in order to eat. Under these chaotic conditions, a new form of stability called for in the new Constitution was needed, but before that, it was necessary to eliminate anxiety over employment prospects. Although the new Japanese Constitution went into effect in May 1947, preceding that, the Labor Union Act went into effect in March 1946. People were afraid of unemployment, and this anxiety was a major factor in the occurrence of social unrest.

Next it was necessary to satisfy people's safety needs through the establishment of stable lives for them. People wanted to live with peace of mind the next day and all the days that followed and to be provided with a place where they could sleep without anxiety. People desired the conditions for obtaining food and living securely without facing threats to their lives or harsh physiological conditions. Thereupon, Japanese companies developed mechanisms for ensuring long-term employment, while the law also made it difficult to dismiss employees. Companies began to provide employee cafeterias and company housing. In this way, as Maslow's safety needs were met, what people sought next was the fulfillment of their love and belonging needs. With their economic growth, many companies expanded their size and scope, and under this situation, the homogenization of the workforce was formed through the group recruitment of new graduates and the offering of lifetime employment. People wanted their own existences recognized and to be recognized as part of the workforce. This desire for belonging was met by the formation of groups of cohorts through the homogenization of the workforce created by the provision of long-term employment, referred to as lifetime employment, and the simultaneous recruitment of new graduates. In this way, a worker could feel he was recognized as part of the cohort under a condition of stable employment. Next, the desire for the meeting of esteem needs grew among workers. This need was met by the formation of a pyramid-type personnel organization as the numbers of young workers increased within the company. Under this scheme, the maintenance of the seniority system played a large role.

As companies grew in size throughout the period of high economic growth, since the group recruitment of new graduates was the major way to replenish the workforce, companies increased this hiring practice in response to the expansion of their scale. This made the pyramid-type personnel composition whereby the number of older workers decreased while the number of younger workers increased. As that happened, for employees who had been with the company for many years, the numbers of new graduates and younger workers that they had to supervise naturally increased while their salaries rose in line with their seniority. It was natural that workers should gradually rise to supervisory positions as they grew older. The more senior a worker became, the more respect for his experience were shown by the younger workers, who were replenished in greater numbers every year. Moreover, when employees reached a certain age, their appointment to supervisory positions was almost automatically ensured. As they gradually gained great respect according to their length of service, their esteem needs continued to be met.

For these reasons, the seniority-based personnel systems seen in many Japanese companies after the end of the Second World War were closely in line with Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Under such a mechanism, since Maslow's hierarchal desires were met, companies could motivate their workers without drawing differences among workers according to ability.

However, the growth of individual companies slowed, sapping their ability to maintain seniority-based salary increases and promotions, and companies became distressed by a shortage of available posts and the tightening of their resources that should be distributed to their employees. Moreover, even with the emphasis on higher education, dissatisfaction mounted among employees with higher education backgrounds when they were not assigned to high-level work and the desire to be treated according to ability grew. It became apparent that workers could not quickly rise to positions where they would be respected because of the slowdown in the company's growth and the lack of available posts. Because of that, it became more difficult for esteem needs to be met within the company. Up until then, companies' personnel evaluation systems that responded from the low-order to higher-order desires under Maslow's hierarchy of needs had been in operation. However, societal changes created a situation where it became difficult for the esteem needs within this hierarchy of needs to be met. Moreover, companies found they did not have the leeway to uniformly improve their treatment of their employees. Under this situation, a revamping of the system's needs arose.

3. Introduction of Management by Objectives

Overview

Up until that point, companies tried to evaluate individual abilities, but in the assessment of ability, which is difficult to ascertain, if the employee had X number of years of work experience, then he should have a certain level of capability, making such an evaluation easy to conduct. Even though ability was difficult to ascertain, the number of years of job experience could be precisely calculated. Thus, personnel evaluation ended up depending on seniority-based evaluation.

In order to change from seniority-based

evaluation to ability evaluation, it was necessary to measure ability much more precisely than up to then. To do so, evaluation should consider the degree of output individual employees produced in their work. If this work performance was factored in, it would be easy to estimate the ability of the employee in his work.

For this evaluation, focus was put on the management by objectives as a means for overcoming seniority-based evaluation inevitably resulting even when traditional Japanese companies tried to measure the ability of individual employees, making it possible to actively consider the transition to a system of meritocracy. This was the method of Management by Objectives (MBO) and Self-Control.[7] It was originally proposed as a means for ensuring consistency with the company's strategy and other measures rather than as a way to ascertain the ability and job performance of individual employees.

In Japan, only a small number of companies had introduced this system by around 1960, but with the recession from 1964 to 1965, MBO rapidly spread, and by 1980, around 60 percent of Japanese companies had introduced it.[8]

Under this method, each employee would set objectives for himself at the start of the fiscal year, and managers would evaluate the degree to which these objectives were achieved by the end of the fiscal year.

However, the difficulty of transitioning from seniority-based evaluations, which had traditionally been in practice, remained. There was also psychological resistance to making clear distinctions in evaluation among the same-aged employees who had together entered the company by the group recruitment of new graduates. At first, the method was separated from evaluation, and the aim was to promote consistency with the company's goals and foster the ability of individual employees. Even when companies tried to tie this to the personnel evaluation of individual employees, it was difficult in the first place to measure the differences in the scope of the objectives set by individual employees, as well as to reflect the method in employees' evaluations by just assessing whether employees had achieved their objectives or not. It was necessary for companies to determine the scope of the work-related objectives individual employees were striving toward and their degree of difficulty. Only then could companies begin to tie the evaluation of the degree of achievement of job objectives to fair treatment within the company.

Psychological aspects and their impact

When an employee's responsibilities are segmented according to the goals of the company, the employee may feel a sense of compulsion, and depending on the situation, it may look excessively demanding to the employee. That could be avoided by having the individual employee set his own objectives.

However, doing that creates the temptation among the employees to set low goals and then try to produce results that achieve 100 percent or more of these goals because they want to be evaluated highly.

Hence, to avoid that, companies needed to consider psychological theories.

What determines the impetus for action is a process whereby an employee considers to what extent that action is linked to results, how much reward is attached to those results, and, moreover, how much value that reward has for the employee. The expectancy theory of motivation[9 10] proposed by Vroom explains the motivation for an individual's attempts to achieve goals. In order to continuously perform actions linked to results, the rewards that can be acquired as the result of that behavior must be what the individual desires. However, if within the company an environment has evolved where it is difficult to fulfill the esteem needs in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, other rewards must be extended to the employee. To do that, companies had to encourage employees to seek in their work not the fulfillment of esteem needs but the fulfillment of the higher-ranking self-actualization needs. The reasoning was that an employee's self-actualization needs in his work will be met by the results of achieving the employee's objectives. In this way, the ideology that work itself is essential for fulfilling one's self-actualization needs permeated companies' thinking.

Moreover, in order to smoothly facilitate MBO, the objectives themselves had to motivate the employees to achieve them. When employees themselves select their own objectives, Locke's goal-setting theory[11] whereby employees thus become committed to their goals[12] and pick higher-level and more specific goals, which produces a higher-level of performance, provided one clue for solving this problem. In the implementation of MBO, employees who must meet goals set their own goals and should be encouraged to set higher-level goals. Thus the premise was that when setting goals, employees should not feel the goals were being forced on them from above but that they themselves set the goals. Employees were also encouraged to feel that setting higher-level goals had value.

However, since employees were evaluated at the end of the fiscal year as to whether they had achieved the goals set at the beginning of the year, employees would again feel that setting low goals made them easier to achieve, which would be advantageous at the time of evaluation. Because of that, the temptation would arise for workers to want to set low goals.

At this point, McClelland's need for achievement theory was invoked.[13 14 15 16] According to McClelland, important motivations for work are the need for achievement, the need for affiliation, and the need for power. McClelland particularly focused on the need for achievement, where a person has a strong desire to assume responsibility for accomplishing tasks. In McClelland's view, persons with a strong need for achievement accomplish the best results when there is 50 percent chance of success and feel a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction with their own efforts when they have succeeded if the chances of success or failure are fifty-fifty.

Companies emphasized employees' need for achievement and encouraged the enhancement of this need.

At that time, the experiments by

Atkinson and Litwin[17] were often cited. In one experiment, subjects played a ring toss game in which they could change the distance for tossing the rings. In this experiment, as the number of tosses increased, many subjects chose the distance at which the difficulty of successfully tossing the ring was at a moderate point. When the subjects were divided according to the strength of their need for achievement, the number of subjects who chose the moderate level of difficulty increased according to the strength of their need for achievement. As the experiment progressed, the number of subjects who chose a moderate level of difficulty increased.[18 19 20 21] From these results, it was concluded that the need for achievement can be learned, the need for achievement can be elevated, and that employees with a strong need for achievement favor difficult challenges with a 50 percent chance of success.

As a result, many companies in their employee training sessions explained that the need for achievement could be raised by learning and that people would then seek more difficult challenges.

However, when people were compared, since psychological effects have an impact in accordance with the above-average effect[22] and the self-evaluation maintenance model,[23] workers felt dissatisfied when compared to others about their treatment based on results tied to evaluation of goal achievement. Because of that, it was difficult to reveal to other people the employee treatment based on the contents of goals set and their level of achievement.

4. Performance-based systems

Overview

Up until this point, whenever there was a serious economic downturn, such as during the oil shock or the recession stemming from the steep appreciation of the yen, companies attempted to change to an ability-based system of evaluation, but each time, they ended up reverting back to the seniority-based system. However, although, in effect, the seniority-based system was prevalent until the 1980s, from around the mid-1990s, companies transitioned to the period of performance-based systems.[24] Even though the phrase "performance-based evaluation" was widely used, there were great differences in its application, depending on the company. Although various interpretations of the concept appeared, the most common understanding of the performance-based evaluation was that it was a "system that treated employees in proportion to their degree of contribution to the activities of the company."[25]

By reflecting the tangible results ascertained by the level of achievement of objectives in their treatment of personnel, companies were tying the results to personnel evaluation and treatment. However, since the scope of the objectives varied according to each type of job, if the company did not evaluate the scope of the duties that each employee was engaged in, it could not evaluate the degree of contribution to the activities of the company. Thus job evaluation became necessary.

In many cases, companies tied the

management by objectives system to the treatment of employees, in combination with the change from the ability-based grade system to job evaluations. The thinking behind an ability-based wage system was that it was an evaluation of an individual's ability and that it would offer work to the individual corresponding to his ability. On the other hand, a salary system based on job evaluation requires an evaluation of the job, and companies reasoned that an individual that is suitable for the contents of that job would be assigned to it. The change from the rating of an individual's ability to an evaluation of the job performed (contribution to the company) required a change in thinking regarding the pivotal evaluation. It was a fundamental change from matching the work to the employee to matching the employee to the work. When trying to fully implement a salary system based on job evaluation, companies had to evaluate not the ability of the individual worker but the work itself. People would be assigned to work whose scope had been evaluated. An employee would be evaluated highly if he was engaged in an important job rather than considering the role he was expected to play.

As companies tried to maintain the conventional personnel system where new graduates were hired together and employed for the rest of their working lives at the company, they had to make do by transferring the employees within the company. As a result, the importance of the employee's work changed according to the transfer. However, companies could not lower the personnel evaluation of an individual who was transferred at the convenience of the company. Having said that, if the importance of the work the employee was assigned to diminished because of the personnel transfer, the evaluation of the work the employee was engaged in would, by necessity, have to be lowered compared to the evaluation before the transfer in line with the evaluation of the work he was doing. Since this would create problems, in actual practice, companies widened the range of jobs that would have the same evaluation and transferred employees within that expanded band. As a result, since a person that could be assigned to a certain job should have the ability to do that job, the evaluation would still not be able to avoid the "ability to do the job" factor. In the end, the job evaluation could not be separated from the ability evaluation because it could not be determined which should have the higher priority.

Psychological aspects and their impact

The seniority system collapsed with the introduction of the performance-based system. Because of that, it became difficult to maintain the traditional form of motivation that had been uniformly applied to work. According to the equity theory of motivation,[26] a person will receive outcomes (remuneration, position, etc.) commensurate with the inputs (effort, etc.) invested in the job. If the outcomes rewarded to a person are small despite the fact his own inputs are greater than another worker's, the person's motivation to perform his duties will be diminished. Conversely, if the worker feels that he has received significant outcomes despite making small inputs, he will increase his inputs to the organization. Motivation will depend on comparing this situation with that of another worker.

It became difficult to uniformly fulfill Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and with evaluations being conducted individually for each employee, the disparities in employee treatment became greater. If the contents of the objectives and the degree of achievement of them are to be linked to specific treatment of the employee, fairness is essential. However, since the impacts of the above-average effect and the self-evaluation maintenance model cannot be avoided, and since feedback on the scope of the employee's objectives and their degree of achievement as well as the treatment of the employee as a result of such an evaluation cannot be given in a way that enables comparison with other workers, feedback must be given separately to each employee, and the evaluation of other employees must be kept secret without disclosure.

As an ideology, a system based on spirit and motivation (achievement motivation) only could no longer be preserved. Moreover, if great disparities are made in the treatment of employees, fair appraisal and treatment are vital. However, in actually, the scope of objectives and their degree of achievement cannot be appraised precisely. Accordingly, the ensuring of procedural fairness and not distributive fairness becomes important.

5. Conclusion: Post-COVID-19 and the future

Changes in governance, impact of growing sophistication of ICT and internationalization

Because of changes in the make-up of shareholders and structure of the organization of companies (role of the board of directors) and strategic demands, mergers and spinoffs have flourished while the system of lifetime employment has collapsed. Moreover, due to ICT and internationalization, optimal global procurement and collaboration have become possible, sparking a decrease in transaction costs.[27 28 29 30]

Because of the intensification of competition and the increasing speed of change, companies must promptly bring in human resources from outside the company, as well as deal with personnel that no longer match the internal operations of the company.

Changes in communication and psychological impacts

More than anything else, remote working has flourished as a result of the years-long COVID pandemic. The widespread use of e-mail and teleconferencing has increased opportunities for members inside and outside the company to attend meetings and share information under the same conditions.[31]

The special characteristics often cited of teleconferencing are: 1) the difficulty of conveying facial expressions, 2) difficulty of conveying the atmosphere of a meeting, 3) severe restrictions on the amount of video and audio information that can be provided due to the bandwidth capacity, 4) inability to freely observe the reactions of persons to whom one wants to pay attention (speaker/presenter or persons other than the speaker/presenter), 5) restriction that only one discussion can be held overall, 6) decrease in concentration since one participates only on screen and is in another location, 7) difficulty of building reciprocal relationships. The characteristics of e-mails are: 1) relationships are extremely language-based, 2) the non-linguistic reactions of the other cannot be seen, 3) exchanges are not whole-of-person, 4) responses may be subject to time lags, 5) dialogues tend to be with oneself.

If telework is the central focus and there is no face-to-face in-person contact, the mere-exposure effect[32 33] declines. When a superior gives sufficient support to a subordinate, daily contact and communication are necessary, but telework makes that difficult. Moreover, when telework makes the detailed process of work difficult to see, it becomes hard for managers to find a reason to reward subordinates, and instead they want to punish subordinates who have weak interpersonal contacts for some reason or other.

Moreover, the psychological distance between those in the company and collaborators outside the company becomes smaller. In addition, because the process of work for each person is difficult to ascertain, the relationship between work, which has traditionally made time management its basis, and the value of and reward for work collapses.

Possible future developments

With the confluence of ICT and internationalization, companies will be compelled to evaluate employees by the results they produce since the barrier between inside and outside the company is reduced and the time clocking of work becomes difficult. As a result, a "contractual relationship" that decides the responsibility allotment for each task and evaluates whether the job has been completed according to the expressed conditions and how much of a further contribution the employee has made to the company as a result becomes more effective for both sides.

The corralling of human resources within the company is inefficient for competing internationally and has low affinity with the group hiring of new graduates and lifetime employment. It is believed that in the future companies will turn to contractual relationships that put more focus on results. The form itself of a "company" may even change. Under those circumstances, it is likely that the evaluation system will change, but as this overview of the personnel systems of Japanese companies after the Second World War has shown, even if companies try to introduce a mechanism for individual evaluations, they will swing back due to psychological inertia to a mode marked by the aspects of seniority. In the future, the conflict between changing and reverting back to the past will likely continue.

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