The Japan Times forum

Foreign IT workers seen as solution to industry shortage

There is a rising demand for IT engineers in Japan as many point out there is a shortage of such professionals domestically. An estimate shows that Japan will face a shortage of close to 600,000 IT-related professionals by 2030.

As companies are moving to recruit workers from overseas, skilled IT engineers, especially from Asia, are increasingly garnering attention. Such a trend seems to be in line with the government's policy to further increase the number of foreign workers with technical skills.

What are some of the issues Japanese firms need to address when expanding the hiring of foreign workers?

Staffing agencies reportedly plan to shore up their efforts to recruit IT workers from Asian countries. Meanwhile, a program called Project Indian Institutes of Technology (PIITs), which involves IT-powerhouse India, invites students from the Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT) to intern at Japanese firms.

The Japan Times organized a forum on June 13, titled "IT human resources sought overseas by Japanese companies: an example of an internship program by IIT students," to enhance the discussion regarding the IT engineer situation in Japan. Japanese companies accepting IIT students as interns and Indian students taking part in the program were invited to discuss their thoughts.

The participants of this forum were Hiroshi Hirabayashi, president and representative director of the Japan-India Association; Shigeo Mizuno, director and corporate vice president of Fujifilm Software Co.; Koji Iwamoto, deputy manager of the general planning department at Tonichi Printing Co.; and Toyoaki Machida, Japan general manager of the global section at Webstaff Co. Additionally, Himanshu Tolani, a third-year undergraduate student at the Indian Institute of Technology, Ropar; Shubham Jain, a third-year undergraduate student at the Indian Institute of Technology, Jodhpur; and Yash Ubale, a third-year undergraduate student at the Indian Institute of Technology, Ropar, participated. The moderator was Takashi Kitazume, chief editorial writer of The Japan Times.

Below are excerpts of their discussion.

Participants of The Japan Times forum held at its office in Tokyo pose before their discussion.   YOSHIAKI MIURA

Moderator: Thank you for your participation despite the bad weather today.

At this panel discussion, I'd like to hear the intentions of those taking part in this program, the feedback from Japanese companies accepting Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) students as interns and also from the Indian students to enhance the discussion on the theme of "IT human resources sought overseas by Japanese companies: an example of an internship program by IIT students."

First, I'd like to ask Mr. Toyoaki Machida of Webstaff Co., who created this internship program, what was the background and reasoning behind the launch of this initiative?

Machida: Let me explain the Project Indian Institutes of Technology (PIITs) program. It provides IIT students with a two-month internship in Japan and aims to create future full-time employment for them at Japanese companies.

My main role at Webstaff is to introduce IT workers from overseas to Japanese companies. We have noticed that the hurdle is still high for Japanese firms wanting to employ foreign workers, prompting us to launch this project.

That hurdle stems from standards required of potential applicants, such as a good command of Japanese language. The whole country is looking to boost recruitment from overseas, but this hurdle remains.

Foreign companies are able to recruit competent individuals regardless of their nationalities. But the main recruitment targets of Japanese firms are solely individuals residing in Japan. Given these differences, it's obvious that there is a discrepancy in competitiveness between foreign and Japanese companies, something that we kept in mind.

Based on that awareness, we thought about what we could do and we fortunately developed ties with IIT while we conducted our business at our branch in Bangalore. That was the start of everything.

We felt the hurdles were quite high for students overseas to come to work in Japan, making it difficult for them to engage in work for a long period without prior experience in the country.

Thus, in March 2016 we launched PIITs, in which we invited six Indian students last year to participate in an internship, and, thanks to the program, Japanese firms will employ four of them. This year, we have 11 students doing internships at several Japanese companies.

Moderator: Now let me turn to two of the firms accepting Indian students this year. What are your companies' intentions behind joining this internship program and what kind of expectations do you have from the interns, as IT human resources, from abroad? In addition, could you explain your companies' situation, in terms of needs? Furthermore, please give us some feedback through this internship on some points that you think need to be given consideration when hiring overseas talent. Can we first hear from Mr. Shigeo Mizuno of Fujifilm Software Co.?

Mizuno: Our company is an IT-business subsidiary of Fujifilm Corp. We create software for general customers.

Our products and services need to be competitive, absorbing newly developed functions properly and promptly and differentiating us from other rivals. This is very crucial in having a competitive advantage. In that sense, the quality of IT engineers working for us is critically important. We always have a desire to hire those with excellent skills.

However, as it is very true that there is a huge shortage of IT-related human resources in Japan, we have been seeking various opportunities to secure outstanding talent. Then, Mr. Machida of Webstaff introduced us this internship program and we seized the opportunity.

As we are aware that Indians are widely known to have high IT skills, we had high expectations from them when we decided to accept two interns through this program.

We expect our Japanese engineers to be inspired by the interns and thus can grow further. That's the synergy we would like to see.

It's been a month or so since we accepted the interns and they have turned in a great performance as expected, true to their reputation. For instance, if we gave the two a challenging task that we would expect them to complete in a week, they managed to accomplish it within a day. Their implementation level is quite high.

We are really happy to take part in this internship program. Our Japanese engineers have actively interacted with them and made efforts to have communication in English since they still do not have good command of the Japanese language.

I'd like to mention a couple of possible challenges when accepting interns from overseas. We felt that the living environment could be a bottleneck. Actually, this program was first proposed to the human resources department at Fujifilm Corp., which went on to introduce it to us. They decided it was difficult to accept interns, because the facility where students can gain working experience is in a western suburb of Kanagawa Prefecture. You cannot expect English signs there and you need to drive to get around, which means some Japanese staff need to accompany the interns on weekends. Fortunately, we are based in Yokohama, which promotes itself as an international city and features sufficient public transportation.

Additionally, we have had some Asian regular workers for many years. So, such a foundation enabled us to proceed with the program smoothly.

Moderator: What do you think is the potential from actively employing foreign workers for your company, as well as Japanese firms in general?

Mizuno: Given the low birthrate, aging society and a decreasing labor force, it's very difficult for Japanese firms to survive if they stick to hiring only domestic human resources. I'm sure most of the businesspeople working for Japanese companies would agree with this.

Talking about Fujifilm, more than half of its sales come from overseas, gaining revenues from customers in the global market. I feel it's indispensable to raise competitiveness by employing superior workers across the globe.

Especially in the IT industry, the United States is the source of new technologies, thus one perspective we need to place importance on is how much we can catch up with their technologies. In that sense, Indians have advantages in that they have good command of English, and can read and understand a huge volume of documents at a fair speed and master the latest technologies. We really have high expectations from international human resources.

Moderator: Thank you for your valuable feedback. Next, Mr. Koji Iwamoto of Tonichi Printing Co., could you give us your comments on why your firm decided to participate in this internship program and what expectations you have? In addition, what did you find after going through the program?

Iwamoto: In our case, Tonichi doesn't have a section in charge of system development. We are the only one into the second year of this internship program, but when we were first offered this program last year, we just casually said "OK" without serious intention as a company. We haven't hired any foreign employees, and nobody can speak English. My department has a team promoting new businesses and I just thought this program sounded a bit interesting.

We had no idea what the Indian Institutes of Technology were like in the first place. We then researched what kind of students they had and came to know that excellent Indian students would come to Japan for an internship. We started to consider what assignments we could give them. Initially, I heard many negative opinions on accepting interns, but, as I have explained it for the past year, the program is now rather well known within our Mainichi Newspapers Group.

We assigned the interns to develop a system to improve operational efficiency. Most of our employees work at printing and its relevant sections, but we also have 70 to 80 staff in our administrative division. Therefore, last year we asked the interns to create a system for schedule management and, for this year, to develop an application for business card management. I assume they are having difficulty with this because it's very Japanese.

In September, we will employ two individuals who took part in last year's internship. When we made the decision to employ them, we had intensive discussions within the company. We knew we had to embark on new ventures at Tonichi since the newspaper industry is in a difficult situation these days. We intended to have a successful product making the most of their IT skills.

What I noticed from implementing this program is it will be well-suited to a company with intentions to work on new projects or to create a change in their businesses. Though we are not a developer of software, we managed to work on new projects. We found out that the intern students are very flexible in addressing the assignments we gave. I imagine typical Japanese systems engineers work via detailed schedules and specifications, probably taking a week or so to complete a task, but Indian interns could develop a product in one day after we gave them rough idea about what we'd like to have.

As for hiring foreign individuals as regular workers, our human resources department has struggled to arrange things for this September when we welcome the two new hires, since it is the first time for us to have foreigners. Some of what we faced during this employment procedure stemmed from a difference concerning the issuing of graduation certificates between the two countries. In Japan, when students do job hunting, they carry a certificate of expected graduation as one of their necessary documents, while in India and abroad, it seems there is no such certificate. They receive a certificate after graduation, but I heard it takes time until they receive it.

Finally, I'd like to mention the possible impact from this internship program on Japanese companies. I heard that about 1.5 million students applied to IIT every year and 10,000 of them are successfully enrolled. The top 1,000 students belong to the department of computer science and Webstaff this year managed to bring 11 from that group. If we were to welcome 100 such students from IIT to Japan, it would be very big news.

I told my colleagues within the Mainichi group that they would surely make a significant contribution to our group companies, so how about hiring 10 to 15 IIT students? If 50 or 100 students from IIT join Japanese companies, we could see a revolutionary change within the IT industry.

Moderator: Thank you very much.

Now I'd like to ask some questions of the students from India who are participating in the internship program. What are some of your thoughts regarding working abroad, especially at Japanese companies? What needs to be improved and what were the challenges you faced? Additionally, what kind of contributions do you think you can make to Japanese firms? First, let's hear from Mr. Himanshu Tolani, please.

Tolani: So as far as the perspective of being a student from IIT, and speaking my point of view as well as (that of) other students who are studying in my university, I would like to say that the students from IIT are open to working overseas. They're looking for opportunities to actually work overseas, because there are various reasons for it. Because if you keep in mind even that the pay, as well as inflation in the country, the pay scales overseas are better compared to India. And also the fact that in India the IT industry is like a rat race. The number of people graduating is increasing while jobs in the IT industry are decreasing.

So apart from that, for students like us it's also an opportunity to work overseas, learn a new culture, get to know a new work culture as I would say Japanese work culture is a bit different from how Indian work culture works. People here are really punctual, they have a real organized way of working throughout the day. So it's a good thing to learn.

I would say this initiative, PIITs, is a good opportunity for students like us to actually show our skills that we are learning in our university.

So as far as my thought regarding working at a Japanese company, I think it would be a good opportunity for me to come here and work for a Japanese company to show my skills in their cause. And also the fact that working this past month has taught me many things such as schedule planning through which I learned to be punctual. In India, you don't really expect people to be on time, but in Japan, you have to be on time. That's a good thing to learn here. And apart from it, regarding working schedules in India, people are not as organized as people are here. So it was a good quality that I learned in my past one month.

I also learned new things about Japanese culture. For example, I went to an onsen recently, which was nice. There was also very good Japanese food that I ate, so there are really good things that I learned here. So I really like this place. It's a good, peaceful and, I would say, well-organized place.

So as far as the challenges are concerned, in the past month that I have faced, I would say the only challenge would be a language barrier to actually communicate. Sometimes it is difficult to express what you want to say or what difficulties you are facing; that would be the only thing. And that happened, I would say mostly in the first couple of days, and after that I got used to it. And every day even I'm learning new Japanese words, so it's a good thing. And I think it, the language barrier, exists wherever you go. So I think people get used to it with time.

Regarding improving the IT industry here, I would say the work culture in Japan and the work culture in the IT industry in India are quite different and I think people may want to adapt the Indian culture because it's more flexible. And plus, it's more deadline-oriented, rather than daily-basis oriented. So people keep the deadline in mind for a particular task, rather than working day in and day out. This means that the IT industry in India is quite relaxed. In Japan, it's very organized and people go to work from nine to five. But in India, you go at 11 o'clock, 12 o'clock and you may work overnight, but the thing is you have to finish the task before the deadline. So this is how IT industries mainly work. Because I think creating software is an art, you need the right frame of mind to win. I think if Japanese IT companies try to accept this kind of work culture, I think they might be able to attract IT engineers from all around the globe.

Hiroshi Hirabayashi is the president and representative director of the Japan-India Association based in Tokyo. After graduating from the University of Tokyo, Hirabayashi entered the Foreign Ministry. During 44 years of service at the ministry, he has served deputy chief of mission at the Japanese embassy in the United States, and as ambassador to both India and France.

Shigeo Mizuno is the director, corporate vice president of Fujifilm Software Co. in Yokohama. Mizuno entered Fuji Photo Film Co., predecessor of Fujifilm Corp., after graduating from Yokohama National University. He was formerly the regional corporate manager at Fujifilm Asia Pacific PTE. Currently, he is in charge of the IT and administrative division.

Koji Iwamoto is the deputy manager of the general planning department at Tonichi Printing Co. in Tokyo, which is a part of the Mainichi Newspapers Group. A graduate of Senshu University in Tokyo, Iwamoto has worked at various departments at the firm. He created the web promotion team in 2015 and is now responsible for accepting Indian intern students.

Himanshu Tolani is a third-year undergraduate student at the Indian Institute of Technology, Ropar, and is majoring in computer science and engineering. He is currently interning at Tonichi Printing Co. His favorite programming language is C++ and his areas of interest are machine learning, deep learning and image processing. His interests include various sports.

Shubham Jain is a third-year undergraduate student at the Indian Institute of Technology, Jodhpur, majoring in computer science. Currently, he works as a software developer intern at Fujifilm Software Co. He enjoys writing software and he hopes to learn a lot from new technologies at the firm, while contributing to its future endeavors. He enjoys music and video-editing in his free time.

Yash Ubale is a third-year undergraduate student at the Indian Institute of Technology, Ropar, pursuing a bachelor of technology in computer science. He's interning at Fujifilm Software Co. as a software developer. His fields of work at the company are machine learning and deep learning. His hobbies include traveling and soccer, and he wishes to further explore Japan.