

## Systems, Society, Culture, and Community: A Study of the Transformation of a System of Labor in Japan

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### **Abstract**

It can be argued that Japan has been successful as a global leader in the 21st century. However, like most countries, many Japanese institutions and systems have gone through transitions and will continue to do so. This in essence is a vital part of the definition of culture, a constantly changing entity. In order to better understand and guide future transformations, it is important to understand what has happened in the past. This is particularly true with the world becoming so entwined that the actions of people in one part of the world often affect people in other regions. Systems theory is one way to examine world systems. By examining world systems, it is easier to study in more detail the various elements of the systems. This paper is an attempt to use a systems framework to examine the transformation from what was once thought to be a system of permanent employment for life in Japan to a system in which there is prominent use of temporary employment practices that has created an increasingly large amount of mobility in the workforce in Japan. It takes a look at the factors that have created these conditions, and in particular, examines some members of the population in Japan that have especially been effected.

**Key words:** systems, transformation, labor, workforce, Japanese university

With the influence of globalization, internationalization, mass media and the Internet, the ability to get information quickly and in large volumes has been

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simplified. Because of this, it has become increasingly necessary to examine events and situations all over the world in order to understand what is happening at the local level. Even before the world became an interconnected place, systems theory had provided a framework to examine what was happening in all aspects of a global world. This paper is an attempt to use a systems framework to examine the transformation from what was once thought to be a system of permanent employment for life in Japan to a system in which there is prominent use of temporary employment practices that has created an increasingly large amount of mobility in the workforce in Japan. It takes a look at the factors that have created these conditions, and in particular examines some members of the population in Japan university faculty members, that have especially been effected.

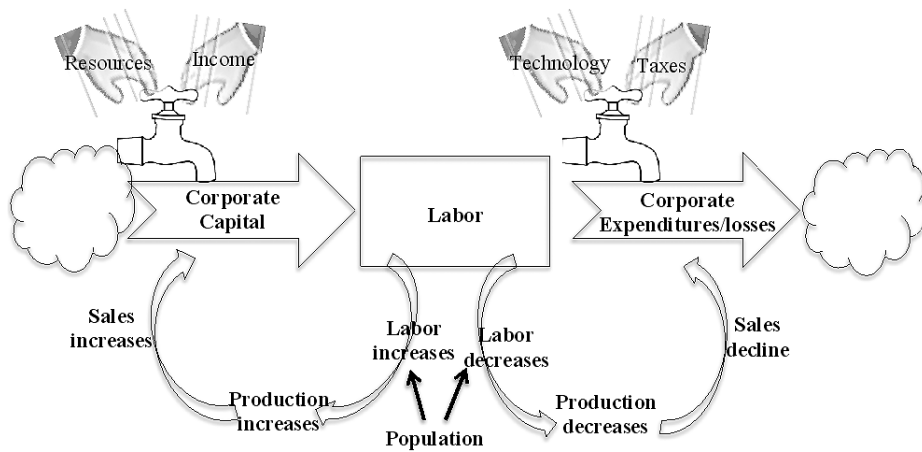
### **Systems Thinking Model**

When examining a system of labor such as labor in Japanese universities, it is helpful to use a systems lens to understand how it came to be the way it is. One especially useful model is Meadows' systems thinking model (2008). One of Meadows' main arguments is that there is a relationship between structure and behavior in systems, and it is necessary to examine both as a whole in order to understand the parts. However, the underlying principle of systems theory is that any system is not only a sum of its parts, but includes all of the outer components interacting together to influence the system as well (Meadows, 2008; Wallerstein, 1982).

What makes Meadows' model valuable is its ability to use a systems lens in a simplified way to look at the individual factors that work together to create a whole. She begins by taking a system component and putting it at the center of an action and showing how the flow of information to the component and away from it influences, and is influenced by, surrounding situations. She labels these central components stocks. Stocks are fed by inflows, while they are diminished by outflowing elements. The inflows and outflows are regulated somewhat by outside influences that act like invisible hands turning faucets through which the flows move at increased or decreased rates accordingly. Meadows' systems model can be used to more closely examine any part of a system and how a system as a whole functions, allowing those within the system to influence change and allowing closer examination of how change has occurred within it. This inspection can then be expanded upon to include other elements and miniature systems of whole, or global, systems.

Within any seemingly simple system of stocks and inflows and outflows, there are various factors that influence increases and decreases of these stocks, inflows

and outflows. Feedback is one. Meadows (2008) explains that feedback in systems take the form of loops in a closed chain. They are causal connections from stock, and are often rules, actions, or physical laws that act to influence inflows and outflows and are dependent on the level of the stock. Since inflows and outflows influence levels of stock, a loop is formed in which each element of systems continually influence each other. Figure 1 is an example of how Meadows' systems model might be used to provide a framework in order to examine labor more closely.



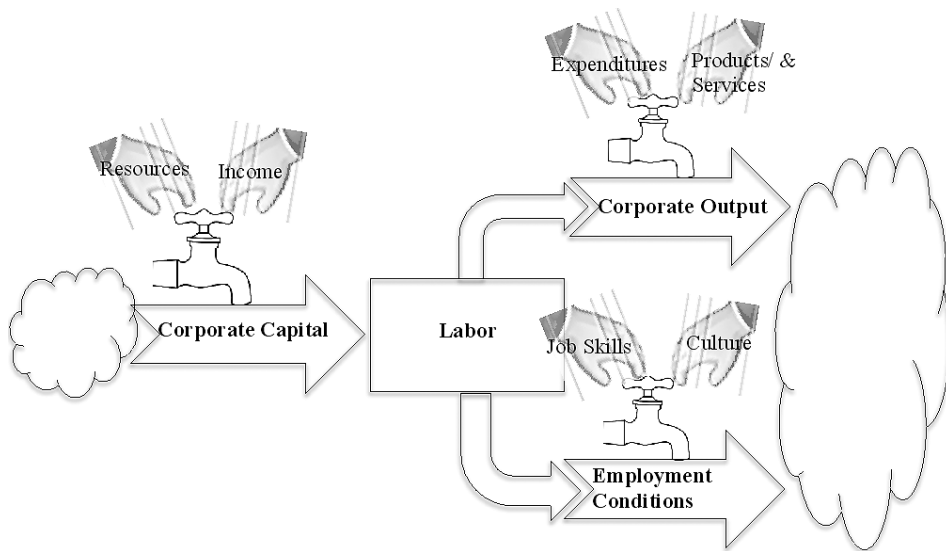
**Figure 1 Labor system with feedback**

Even though labor can be considered part of corporate capital, in order to examine a system of labor in relation to corporate capital and expenditure, one can assign it a stock position in Meadows' model and see how inflows, outflows and feedback work. Factors, such as resources and income, work to influence the flow of corporate capital. Fewer resources and profits will cause the flow to slow so that there will be less corporate capital. Monetary capital would influence the amount available to hire labor. Labor in turn influences the outflow of corporate expenditures in the form of such things as products and services. Elements such as technology and taxes affect expenditures, or outflows, to either increase productivity or hinder it depending on the advancement and adoption of technology, increases or decreases of corporate taxes, and so on. However, there are more factors involved. In what Meadows calls a feedback loop, labor does not remain the same. Due to the influence of capital, for instance, a corporation might find it necessary to hire more employees. If the number of employees increases, production might rise, causing sales to increase. Increasing sales would provide more earning capital, which would likely increase inflows to labor. This loop is known as a reinforcing loop since it

adds to inflow causing it to grow. On the other hand, less capital could cause a company to lay off employees creating a smaller labor pool, making it difficult to maintain high production levels, which might result in overall sales decline. This decline would influence the outflows, corporate expenditures and losses. This kind of feedback loop is known as a balancing feedback loop because its goal is to create equilibrium. Despite this, there are also factors outside this miniature system which influence labor as well. In this example, population is shown. If the number of available workers in a society decreases, the amount of labor will naturally decrease, while a large number of available employees will cause labor to increase. This is assuming that the company will only hire the amount of labor that is necessary for its goals. This example does not take into account such things as social or cultural factors, such as providing jobs for members to sustain a certain community, for example. Though that could be examined as well, both being components of a world system if one were to expand on this illustration. The cloudlike drawings in Figure 1 represent the beginnings and endings of flows. However, they do not represent definitive entities, but merely sources and continuing relationships with other systems and elements. They mark the boundaries, or framework, for the part of a broader system to be studied. Without boundaries, it would be entirely too difficult to examine any one part of a broader world system as Wallerstein (1982) describes. Nevertheless, Meadows and Wallerstein agree that there are no separate systems, but one large world of influencing and interacting entities. The boundaries drawn allow for the examination of how the system works and of the question being studied.

Accepting the notion that systems thinking is not merely a theory or model, but a paradigm, or concepts and worldviews members of a society or culture hold, (T. D. Hall, 2000; Meadows, 2008), Meadows' framework provides a more simplified way to examine systems and can be applied to a more specific system such as labor in a Japanese context. There has been much focus recently in Japan about changes of labor; in particular potential changes in employment of non-permanent workers such as part-time, dispatch company, and contract workers (Hanami, 2004; Kojima, 2009; Morishima, 2003).

Figure 1 illustrates how Meadows' systems model could be utilized to examine how labor as stock in a system is influenced by various flows and feedback in a basic form. Figure 2 shows a similar example of how labor is affected by inflows of corporate capital and outflows of corporate output and employment conditions. As in Figure 1, corporate output includes expenditures and losses; however, in this example, it is influenced by expenditures and costs of products and services. Moreover, unlike Figure 1, labor outflow shows employment conditions. In this illustration, job skills and culture are two examples that influence the rate of outflow. These examples demonstrate how lack of skills can influence type of job,



**Figure 2 Labor system illustrated**

followed by pay, which might increase or decrease outflow. In the same way, culture can influence volume of outflow. In this case, culture refers to cultural values, beliefs and norms. For instance, the cultural belief that children under 16 years of age should not work for companies might mean that young people under the age of 16 could not be legally hired. This in turn might cause corporations to have to pay higher wages to adults and increase labor costs. Like the Figure 1 example, feedback would exist, however, in order to focus on stock and outflows, this illustration does not show feedback patterns.

### **Labor systems in a Japanese context**

#### **Transformation of workforce**

In the Japanese context, until recently, employment in Japan has been typified by lifetime employment, characterized by young people being hired by one company after graduating from high school or college and remaining with the same company until retirement age (Morishima, 2003; Takeuchi-Okuno, 2010). However, Sugimoto (2010) and others claim that lifetime employment only existed in large corporations, and that small and medium-size companies always had flexible workforces to adapt to changeable economic conditions. Whichever the case, it has been shown that the number of non-permanent workers, or employees with unstable employment, has risen. According to Hanami (2004), after the bubble economy of the 80s ended, the number of part-time employees rose from 10% to nearly 23% in 2001. In particular, the percentage of women working part-time rose from

approximately 19% to 39% during the same period. Houseman and Osawa (2003) point out that public policy encourages part-time employment with cuts in tax benefits for households in which the income of a spouse is over what is generally the pay a full-time employee would receive. This often discourages many women from returning to work full-time after having children. It should be noted that compared to some countries where part-time employment is defined by working fewer hours than full-time employees, in general there have been two types of part-time employment in Japan. One type consists of fewer hours, but may continue indefinitely, while the other type is defined by the same amount of hours as full-time employees, but with fewer work benefits, lower wages and more flexible work hours. Temporary workers, such as dispatch workers and contract laborers, have also increased, by nearly three times in the same decade. This has brought the figure for non-regular, or non-tenured employees to approximately 26% in 2001 (Hanami, 2004) and 34% in 2008 (Takeuchi-Okuno, 2010), almost one-third of all employed workers in Japan. With the unemployment figures at almost 5% in 2010 (Yamada, 2010), that means that the number of permanent fixed-term employees is just over 60%. While more than half the available working population, it is hardly representative of lifetime employment, when one considers that this does not include those who have limited term contracts.

### **Job Satisfaction**

These factors have significant influence on job satisfaction. Having unstable employment and uncertain job outlooks can cause great stress and influence one's outlook on life and satisfaction with life. This can be seen as illustrated in Figure 3. Factors such as national economy, corporate policy, and corporate culture work to influence the inflow of employment conditions. This inflow affects job satisfaction, which then is reflected in employee work output. Employee work output is also influenced by such things as rewards and punishments, personal goals, and psychological needs.

Most recently the Tohoku earthquake in 2011 and the Lehman Shock in 2008, have affected the Japanese economy. Adhikari (2005) explains that several changes have occurred in employee-management relations triggered by Japanese national factors such as government rules and regulations, national institutions, the labor market and national culture. These elements caused the inflow to slow down, resulting in increases in use of non-regular, or non-permanent employment, such as part-time workers, dispatch companies, and fixed-term contracts. This increase has led to more job dissatisfaction. Dissatisfaction includes such conditions as lower wages, wage disparities within a single workplace, wish for more job stability in permanent employment, job disparities of doing virtually the same job as permanent

employees without the same wages and benefits, and little choice of employment (Hara et al., 2013). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2013 report explains that a 2012 government survey on well-being unsurprisingly showed that happiness levels were lower for non-regular workers than regular workers (OECD, 2013). Moreover, compared with employees who have permanence in their company, non-permanent workers have fewer opportunities for professional development in order to improve job skills and job marketability. When employment conditions deteriorate due to financial difficulties, such as increased workloads distributed among fewer employees, there is also the danger of employee burnout. Zamini, Zamini, and Barzegary (2011) point out that besides work overload and time constraints, organizational factors such as management style, lack of job security, and few opportunities for promotion can contribute to job burnout among university professors and employees. Permanent employees cite job satisfaction factors such as job contentment, feelings of worthwhileness and wages, as well as workplace training and skills development. The Japan Labor Bulletin for 2003 describes how both non-regular and regular employees who had access to training courses or systems supportive of self-improvement and professional development are more satisfied than those who did not. It should be noted that a large part of skills development in Japan occurs inside corporations, and there are few opportunities for adults over the age of 20 to attend university as undergraduates to acquire new skills and qualifications. This makes it somewhat difficult and expensive to gain additional skills outside the workplace (“The 2003 White Paper on the Labour Economy: A Summary of the Analysis,” 2003). On the contrary, many working women in particular enjoy some aspects of non-permanent employment. The main reason part-time workers cited for job satisfaction was flexibility of work hours.

Job satisfaction strongly influences employee work output. (Toh, 2013) However, because most non-Japanese and women work as non-permanent or fixed contract employees, their job satisfaction in many cases is not as high as permanent employees. Lee (2010) highlights the relationship between employment conditions, job satisfaction and employee productivity by pointing out that employers should improve the quality of workers’ lives in order to increase company profits. Quality of life factors mentioned include discriminatory treatment against temporary workers and low salaries among others. This job satisfaction within a system is shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3 Job satisfaction system

### Labor Conditions in Japanese Universities

The relationship between job satisfaction and employee work output can be seen in the Japanese education system as well. Employment conditions of educators working at Japanese universities are varied with the majority having non-permanent employment, often having to change jobs every year. There are numerous accounts of job dissatisfaction in the Japanese university industry. (I. P. Hall, 1998; Klaphake, 2010; McCrostie & Spiri, 2008; Rivers, 2010; Unger, 1995) This often results in low motivation, which can in turn affect the stock of quality of education, lowering its level so that the outflow of student qualifications and societal influences are negatively affected. This can be illustrated using Meadows’ systems model in Figure 4.

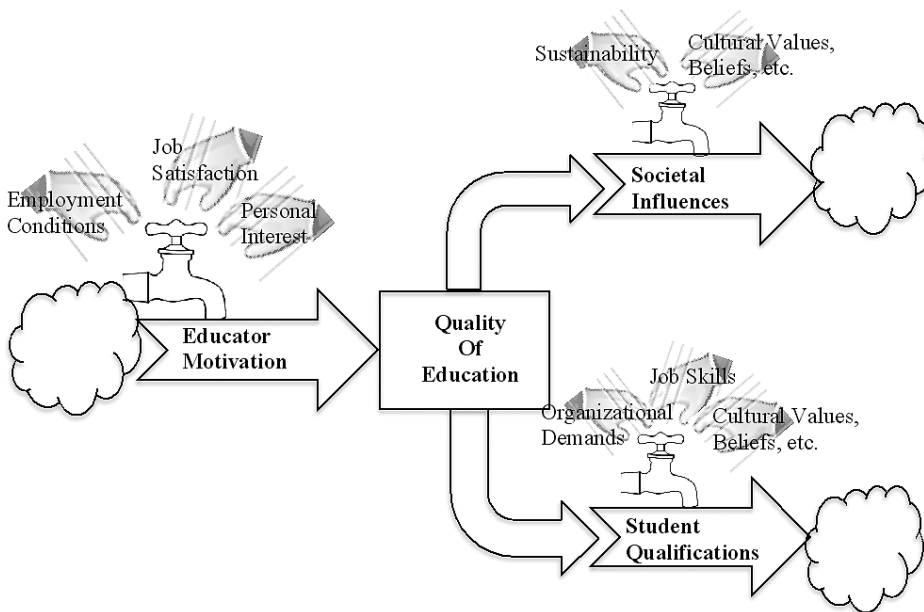


Figure 4 Quality of education system



“Academic Apartheid” (I. P. Hall, 1994) in Japanese universities leads to questions regarding the quality of Japanese education, arguing that it has failed to aid Japanese students in developing critical thinking skills necessary for changing life. In a Japan Policy Research Institute working paper, Masao (1994) further reports that the first Japanese winner of the Fields Prize expressed the belief that Japanese youth lack the all-important ability to think the unthinkable and imagine the imaginable. In other words, they lack creativity and innovativeness to solve complex problems.

Using a systems approach, it is possible to examine labor conditions at Japanese universities. During the Meiji era in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Japanese government saw the need for Japanese people, or Japanese elite members of society at least, to learn more from other countries and sent over 180 Japanese overseas, while at the same time inviting approximately 185 non-Japanese teachers to Japan. These non-Japanese teachers were in effect temporary labor until the elite Japanese students returned from abroad. In fact, after the Japanese returned, most of them were fired and sent home or made temporary workers in order to gain knowledge about foreign countries while attempting to limit foreign influence. This trend, which began in the 1870s, is seen to be one of the precursors to today’s practice of hiring non-Japanese teachers in universities and other educational institutions on limited contract basis. (I. P. Hall, 1998; Rivers, 2010) In fact, in 1992, as a result of a verbal directive from the Ministry of Education (the current Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology), to all national universities to not retain non-Japanese teachers over the age of 50, 70% of all non-Japanese teachers over the age of 50 were dismissed, and national universities began to only hire new non-Japanese teachers under the age of 40 or 35. The reason given was that younger teachers on one-year contracts for four years were cheaper than those over 50 who would have to be paid higher salaries in Japan’s seniority pay system (JPRI, 1996). According to a 2007 government report, the percentage of non-Japanese teachers at Japanese universities was as follows: 2.5% professors, 4.5% assistant professors, 7.4% lecturers, and 6.7% staff (MEXT, 2007). This is a significantly smaller number compared to English-speaking countries whose language dominates Japanese foreign-language education (I. P. Hall, 1994, 1998).

One of the legacies of the Japanese style of lifetime employment has been that it gave better working conditions and stability only to male workers with Japanese nationality hired directly after leaving school. According to Hanami (2004), women, minorities, foreigners and those who failed to complete their education or who failed to get a job just out of school were excluded from this privileged and stable employment. He goes on to point out that non-regular labor has always been used to adjust labor costs in times of economic fluctuations and to help preserve job

security for regular lifetime workers. This continues today due to inadequate anti-discrimination laws and lack of trade union efforts to change this discriminatory structure so that members of these groups continue to face difficulties in securing permanent regular employment with all its benefits.

This is one factor that influences educator motivation and job satisfaction. Job satisfaction and employment conditions are two major factors that often impede inflow into quality of education. As noted previously, limited opportunities for job stability, wage disparities for similar jobs, fewer choices of employment, and job burnout may affect job satisfaction negatively. Part-timer teachers at universities have been known to teach at as many as four or five different universities in the same week, teaching as many as eight hours a day, five or six days a week for six to seven months out of the year. On the other hand, they usually have freedom to do what they want for the other three to four months and do not have the pressures of organizational politics or non-teaching responsibilities. Generally, this situation is unstable due to the fact that universities use part-time teachers, especially, as a way to control costs.

### **Recommendations for change**

Government agencies and social scientists espouse a need for changes in the Japanese labor system that increasingly encourages temporary employment practices and deterioration of employee life. Systems and organization researchers advocate the need to locate responsibility within the system in order to affect successful transformation. Meadows (2008) points out that too often the symptoms are mistakenly addressed when there are deeper problems within the system. In order to do this, Meadows stresses the need to work towards the good of the whole, and not only one element. She also emphasizes complexity and acceptance of it. Too often fear of complexity and the potential problems, the negative aspects, are focused on to the detriment of actual applying creativity to expand the boundaries of caring.

The system of labor in Japanese education can be viewed as one element that is a result of deeper fears. An increase of non-Japanese and people who are currently limited to non-permanent jobs, often those at the margins of society, might be related to a latent fear of the unknown or a desire to preserve the *status quo*. This desire includes a stifling of curiosity that might lead to acceptance and integration of marginalized people who make up most of the population of non-permanent workers.

A JRPI report (1996) points out that transformation of systems involve changing people who create them. This in turn involves education. It involves awakening curiosity and creativity, as well as stimulation and a desire for self-

development and achievement. Education is a means for providing tools for action, not merely knowledge (Masao, 1994). Another element that is often overlooked is factors that influence resistance to change. One of them is competing commitments. This is the idea that, while people may strongly desire change, they are unconsciously unwilling to commit energy to actually work towards change due to some kind of hidden resistance (Kegan & Lahey, 2001). In organizations and systems, people who have competing commitments actually behave in ways that undermine their own success because of some seemingly irrational fear. The employee who works at a level that is below his or her actual capabilities may unconsciously do that so other employees will think he or she is not an overachiever and for fear of jealousy from them is one example. Competing commitments act as obstacles to change and limit inflows and outflows, such as employee work output, (Figure 3), and hinder worker motivation, (Figure 4), along with job burnout.

Zamini, Zamini, and Barzegary (2011) discuss some of the cultural factors involved in job burnout of university professors and faculty. Like Hall (2000), they recognize the importance of identifying cultural and organizational values and goals for that organization. They also stress the need to make efforts to become a more inclusive culture and incorporate a higher level of employee involvement to lower levels of stress and improve employee satisfaction. Moreover, others emphasize the need to improve overall conditions for non-permanent employees, provide more opportunities for skills and career development and to promote acceptance of diverse employment categories to lessen discrimination and job disparity. (Hanami, 2004; Hara, 2013)

## **Conclusion**

After examining the history of labor in Japan and the transformation from a system characterized by lifetime employment to one dominated by temporary and more unstable employment practices, it is apparent that changing the labor system utilized by Japanese universities would be advantageous. Although the system of employing non-Japanese educators in Japan has a long history, the system of allowing them to have tenure and permanence has been relatively recent. Some researchers seem to imply that this is mainly because of traditions and habits rather than any active attempts to discriminate. However, other researchers and educators have written works showing that there have been conscious attempts by Japanese universities to not only limit the number of tenured foreign faculty in order to save costs, but also due to fear of new ideas that non-Japanese professors might bring to influence change in Japanese university organizations (I. P. Hall, 1994, 1998). In addition, because a large number of non-Japanese working in Japanese universities

teach language skills, which often has lower status than other teaching and research subjects in Japan, there seems to be a reluctance to hire them, despite the fact that languages, in particular English, are seen as important for the university and for students to become more globally competent. Thus, this paper suggests some ideas for future consideration in order to promote acceptance of both diverse employment categories and diverse workers. Such acceptance will be necessary if Japan is to become more competitive and be a more influential global leader in a continually changing world.

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