

Cross-Cultural Factors on Workers' Mental Health - From the Experience of the EAP Service

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Abstract. *There are various stress factors on employees who work in a different culture and such cross-cultural factors cannot be ignored. Occupational mental health is now an issue discussed by the Government, but information from the Human Resources Department of companies indicates that the support system for workers who work out of Japan is not yet well-developed. Meanwhile, cases from an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) service show the reality of Japanese workers' situation in different cultures and how they cope with stress with the assistance of the EAP. This paper indicates that not only is support needed for each individual case, but also a support system for companies including consulting, sharing information and networking is required. This is a challenge for mental health specialists.*

Key words: cross-cultural mental health, employee assistance program (EAP), e-mail counseling, occupational mental health

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INTRODUCTION When working people have psychological problems, various factors affect them and culture may be one. An increase in mental health disorders among working people is now one of the important national challenges in Japan. The Government shows guidelines for measures that companies should take by promoting four mental health care systems; (1) self-care, (2) care by higher ranking members of staff e.g. manager, (3) care by in-house specialists such as industrial physicians, and (4) care by outside resources such as medical clinics, counseling facilities, and public services (Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, 2006). Many companies have started adopting these measures in the rapidly changing occupational environment. The work environment is changing in many ways, for example, globalization of business activities has produced an increasing number of workers who work in different cultures. This results in various conflicts i.e. language, lifestyle, sense of values, and isolation from one's social network. All these factors have an influence on workers' psychological health. People involved in such a situation have sometimes been introduced to counseling on the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). This article will show the current situation of human resources departments dealing with employees' psychological problems related to cultural issues, and how the EAP supports these departments and employees. The article will also examine the role of mental health specialists in such cases.

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STRESS FACTORS ON THE CROSS CULTURAL WORKPLACE

There are various stress factors on workers in a different culture. For example, tremendous efforts are made by workers to adapt to an unfamiliar culture and lifestyle so much so that this effort can deprive them of their ability to cope with other matters. Another factor is a heavy workload. In the case of expatriates living outside Japan, they tend to be transferred to smaller firms than the one they worked for in Japan, and they are required to manage various tasks with smaller numbers of staff. This leads to more overtime. Communication problems are another big reason for stress. It is not simply a matter of language but is related to deeper issues such as sense of values and way of thinking. In addition, less social support can make these workers feel a sense of loneliness. This may come from having no colleagues and supervisors they feel they can talk to and trust at work. It may be worse for workers away from families in their home country as the support they received when returning home in the evening is no longer available. Another stress factor may be conflict between the headquarters in Japan and the local firm (Tsukui, 2006). In some cases, conflict between the top managers of both firms burden local staff, and in another cases, an unrealistic expectation from headquarters on local firms is a big source of stress, often caused by the headquarters' lack of understanding of the local situation (Katsuda, 2006).

Voices from human resources staff on cross-cultural mental health issues

As seen in the governmental guidelines, employees' psychological problems are to be handled not only by individuals but also companies. The company's role is to support prevention by finding problems at an early stage, introducing proper treatment, and by promoting smooth re-adaptation to the workplace. The human resources (HR) department should deal with such matters with the help of in-house specialists such as industrial physicians, nurses and psychologists. This is applied to all employees, but when it comes to expatriates who work far away from the headquarters and out of the country in a different culture, HR often have difficulties in finding a solution.

A symposium entitled 'Mental health care for expatriates and families' was held in June, 2006, by the Japanese Society of Transcultural Psychiatry (JSTP), Tokio-Marine & Nichido Medical Service Co., Ltd., Tokio-Marine & Nichido Risk Management Co. Ltd., and International Assistance Co., Ltd. The participants numbered more than 90 people, including members or managers of human resource departments, industrial physicians, cross-cultural mental health specialists, and others concerned with this issue. In the symposium, a survey was conducted on how companies deal with the issue of mental health of expatriates in foreign countries. The results were as follows.

- No observation of the situation in foreign branch offices;
- Hard to imagine the problems in a foreign workplace or the daily life there;
- Not many cases are experienced, so a lack of know-how exists as to how to deal with each case;
- Do not know where to seek consultation and medical assistance.

These answers show how companies currently address the problem. There are three important related factors. First, the cases and experiences of managing the process tend to be hidden inside a division or in a company who may regard the mental health issue of a worker as in some way shameful (Ohnishi, 1992). This attitude inhibits making use of the experiences for future cases within or outside the company. Second, information about resources is not well organized. There are many medical clinics or counseling services that are available in the Japanese language, but this information is often not accessed or used. Sometimes, old and unavailable information is spread to human resources departments or to expatriates. Finally, the staff at the headquarters often does not know the situation of local offices even though they recognize the outcome of the business itself.

A SUPPORT SYSTEM FOR INDIVIDUALS; EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (EAP)

Employee Assistance Professionals Association defines EAP as ‘a worksite-based program designed to assist (1) work organizations in addressing productivity issues and (2) “employee clients” in identifying and resolving personal concerns, including, but not limited to, health, marital, family, financial, alcohol, drug, legal, emotional, stress, or other personal issues that may affect job performance.’ In Japan, EAP is listed as one of the outside resources in the governmental guidelines and has rapidly prevailed in this decade. The EAP service the author deals with uses internet technology as well as telephone, face-to-face support and provides a stress-check via its website (Note 1), counseling, consultation for employees, human resources and family members. This is helpful for users because of accessibility regardless of time and place (Takehara et al., 2005). The cases introduced below show the existence of cross-cultural problems among workers.

Case 1: Male manager with 5-year foreign posting

This client experienced complicated work due to a change of social situation and many new laws in the country he was sent to. He also had to deal with a larger amount of jobs, which led him to too much overwork, and he also found himself trapped in conflicts between the local firm and the headquarters in Japan. He gradually developed a poor health condition and suffered from depression, which led to him receiving treatment at a local medical clinic. At the same time, his family member’s inability to adapt to a new school environment and the difference of the school’s attitude towards the problem confused him. He expressed his feelings and composed his thoughts through e-mail counseling, and also gained information from an EAP Doctor about medication he was taking in the country he lived. He felt a sense of relief after expressing his will to return to Japan although the company asked him to stay longer. In this case, EAP was exploited as a step to express and organize his mind through exchanging e-mails, and to gain directions for prescription in his own language.

Case 2: Male factory manager away from his home country and family for 4 years

A communication problem arose due to the arrival of a new local chief executive while this manager was working hard with no free time. Lack of a close adviser and distance from his family led to him feeling a sense of isolation, and dissatisfaction with the company grew after his assignment in the foreign country was extended without a clear explanation. He wrote in his e-mails that he did not understand his wife anymore because of a lack of daily communication, and was worrying about his children who had to grow up without their father. He explained his poor health condition, depressive feelings and anxiety. As his state deteriorated after starting e-mail counseling sessions, the procedure was switched to telephone counseling and a counselor recommended him to seek medical assistance. He refused to go to a clinic which provided a medical service in his own language because he lived in a small Japanese society and was anxious of being the subject of gossip. But through the counseling session, he decided to talk to another chief executive about his work situation. His condition improved after talking to the director and an understanding was reached. Taking a vacation in Japan to see his family and relatives gave him a sense of relief according to his e-mail.

Case 3 : Cultural conflict caused by the domestic transfer of a young male worker

This client was transferred to a branch office in a region away from his hometown. A different way of communication, accent, and dialects of the people in the new

surroundings resulted in a lack of smooth communication at work, and he had a sense of isolation and loneliness. During e-mail counseling sessions, he said that he felt as if he was "living abroad" even in his own country. He became emotionally unstable and lost motivation for work as well. His attempt to adjust to the community by joining a local hobby group did not work well. He said that 'Many expatriates from foreign country must have the same feelings. I am just like them'. Medical support was recommended by his counselor for his emotional status, and finally he decided to leave the firm and to return to his hometown. This is a case of a domestic transfer causing maladjustment due to cultural conflicts.

From other cases

Apart from the cases above (Note 2), there are many other cases involving Japanese expatriates abroad, expatriates in Japan from foreign countries, and Japanese local staff in Japan-based branch offices of foreign companies. Some of them mention the differences in doing business, for example, in Japan everything takes more time because of the decision making and documentation process. Some foreign staff face a different sense of values at work, in their private life, or regarding time or human relationships. International marriage and education of their children can also be a big source of conflict; such as which language they should use or in which culture they should be raised.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE FOR THE FUTURE The current situation regarding international companies and individual cases indicate that mental health specialists should adopt the following:

- Counseling or treatment for individuals with problems;
- Consultation for people in HR and education of employees as a means of prevention;
- Developing a support system for companies and communities.

Globalization of business is now unstoppable and change even seems to be getting faster, consequently, the number of people who encounter and need to adapt to different cultures will increasingly grow. People's minds, however, are not ready to adapt to the pace of change. The problem of workers who become unbalanced while living abroad is not only an issue limited to a small proportion of the population but one which affects the whole of society. Awareness of this issue is necessary among the members of HR departments and experts in mental health.

Surveys of social resources and attempts are being made to network Japanese mental health specialists abroad (Suzuki, 2001; Noda, 2003). The objective is to promote sharing of information and cooperation among the experts gathered in a community. The next challenge after that will be cooperation among Japanese communities worldwide.

If the networking among various human resource departments were more advanced, it would be possible to share experiences and learn from other firms. It is still the case that companies tend to conceal mental health cases, regarding them as an "embarrassment." The issue of personal information protection also needs to be resolved. The sharing of know-how, however, would benefit all overseas companies. A coordinator who would act as the focal point is a requisite for networking. An academic organization such as JSTP or other non profit organizations, having no conflict of interest with firms and thus able to act neutrally, could support the overseas companies under close cooperation with the local community. Specifically, consultation on cases with HR departments, educational activities on prevention, and the supply of information on medical facilities and other available resources are possible contributions. This could lead to making a framework for learning "best-practice" among companies concerned. This eventually could become a support to society as a whole. It would also be beneficial to constantly update the information on the patient and make it available for sharing among the participants.

In the field of mental health, there is no one perfect system of support. We must aim to decrease the number of untreated cases by widening the layers of support offered by various resources. It should also be pointed out that having an effective system would lead to better prevention, early diagnosis and treatment, and smooth social rehabilitation. Organization such as JSTP can play a vital role in formulating this system.

NOTES

1. Employee Assistance Professionals Association website:
<http://www.eapassn.org/public/pages/index.cfm?pageid=869>
2. In case descriptions from EAP as above details are changed for protection of privacy and publication of the cases has the approval of the compliance committee of the company.

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