

A Word with Ikeda Shingou: Labour perspectives in Japan, between market transformation and work-life balance for carers

An interview by Francesca Di Gioia to Ikeda Shingou, Senior Researcher in the Department of Human Resource Management at The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (JILPT).

The interview took place during the 13th Edition of the International Conference by ADAPT, «[Towards a Workless Society? An Interdisciplinary Reflection on the Changing Concept of Work and its Rules in Contemporary Economies](#)», held in Bergamo from 30 November to 2 December 2023. Ikeda Shingou participated in the event, delivering a presentation titled *Changing employment society in Japan: expansion of service economy and middle-aged workers* during *Plenary Session #2*.

In your paper “The Future of the Japanese Long-Term Employment Society: The Consequences of Post-Industrialization and Increase of Unmarried Workers”, you argue that, in the context of the expansion of the non-manufacturing sector and of the fluid employment, it’s important to develop transferable skills based on tasks in order to construct better fluid labour market with less disadvantage of job turn over. What kind of actions should be put in place, in your view, to make this development effective?

The Japanese government developed job searching system based on tasks in order to make the job searcher change the job to another sector. For example, some workers leave the manufacturing sector and then they can search for another job in the service sector based on the tasks, like the interactive communication skills, analytical skills and something like that.

So in Japan the internal labour market in one company is very flexible. The employees change their job in the same company and someone starts their career as a salesperson, but they sometimes change their job to become a clerical worker or to another

role in the same company, so that the skills of each person are very diverse compared with the workers in the European labour market. As you know, the European labour market defines the job and hires the workers in this way, but in Japan the employer doesn't define the job when hiring the workers, and only after the hire, the job is assigned, so the tasks are very changeable in the same company.

So they choose the person, not the skills. And how do they know they found the skills they need for the job?

In the general description of the job they have to define their skills, based on job experience, but the task is the smallest unit of the job, so they can find what kind of tasks they experience. So, it is easy to define the skills based on tasks. For example, consider the manager: the manager’s main skill is direction, but they sometimes play a role with the staff as a “playing manager”. In Japan, the manager is expected to work with staff as a player, so they undertake two roles: as a manager and as a staff. So the role is changeable in Japan.

Managers cannot understand their skills exactly, because they always change their tasks in the same role. And when they change job, if they can't find a new job as a manager, they have a probability to find a new job as a staff, for example as a clerical worker or salesperson, but they sometimes don't understand their skills exactly. So when they are searching for the best or the main job and they can't find a new job in the labour market, they can see themselves based on the tasks and so based on these tasks, the probability to find a new job becomes higher than the former.

In Japan the skills are generally acquired via on-the-job training, via the experience, so undertaking tasks is the best chance to acquire the skills matching to the job. For example, to communicate with customers and sell the items, they don't learn how to sell the items from the boss or the senior salesperson. They just experience and so struggle to sell the commodities in front of the stores. The kind of training is very general in Japan, so they don't understand what kind of skills should they have to do a job. So focusing on tasks can easily define the skills inside each person.

In your paper "The Necessity of Reduced Working Hours under the Re-familization of Elderly Care", you argue the need, in the context of the gradual "re-familization" of long-term care for the elderly, for future systems for supporting workers to combine work with providing long-term care to be premised on an "autonomy-oriented care" approach. What implications do you think this approach might have on the current system of protections for care providers?

You know the opposite type of providing care is called "the devoted care". It means caring like a mother to the older person. Many Japanese carers are suffering from the worst stress and frailty due to the full commitment to providing care like the mother. Sometimes the carer kills the care recipient or they kill themselves. This is a very serious social problem in Japan. Recently the care support policy stressed another relationship between carer and care recipient. It means that the adult is inherently an autonomous person, so they don't take care so much but they give them more autonomy.

You speak in your paper about the recent reform of the social security system. Do you think that

this approach might suggest a new reform of the system?

For each carer, the kind of protection is important and also the support from the company, which provides care leave or part-time working or flexible working arrangements, the kind of burden for the employer; but if the employee choose the autonomy-oriented care, the burden of the company is relaxed, because the employee might not need so much support from the company. On the other side, there is social security such as care insurance service. Autonomy oriented care might not need much services, because they leave the older person alone for some hours and they don't need the care service at that time. It's a gradual change of social custom. The government stresses autonomy oriented care actually, but the act or law don't need to be changed, they just have to be announced and training has to be offered to the employee and to some carers through seminars and announcements, that's very important.

With reference to long-term employment, you argue that stability of employment and high wages affect the quality of work, making it a desirable form of employment. In your view, what else makes employment a quality employment today?

Psychological satisfaction is important for the workers in the service sector. These workers often stress enjoyment of providing service to the customer and they feel so happy sometimes, like in the typical case of the worker in the theme park or movie theatre, they enjoy providing service to the customer like entertainment, although their wage and employment security are not sufficient. Some workers in the hospitals and care facilities express their hospitality to the patient and they feel happy through providing a service.

That's a very important factor to discuss the quality of work, but in the short term providing service is sufficient for the workers. For example, when they are young or unmarried or they have the husband as the breadwinner, in that case they don't think about the money and the household sustainability, so they feel happy for such kind of work, but they leave the job when they marry or at the time of the childbirth. So on this basis the household is a very important factor for the quality of work in Japan. The social security system is not so strong in Japan for the low

income workers. In this sense, I stress the wage and the employment stability to discuss the quality of work, in the new kind of service workers' career.

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