

Lessons learned from working with Japanese corporations in Norway

Håkon Heskja is a seasoned Executive Search professional and one of the founders of Human Assets Consulting based in Oslo, Norway. He has gained exceptional insights after conducting countless Norwegian as well as international searches, advising both local Norwegian and international corporations. His main focus has always been the Natural Resources and Industrial sectors, with extensive experience from management roles linked to technology, engineering and operations.

Having assisted one of the largest Japanese oil companies in Norway for several years, I was asked to assist when another of the Japanese oil firms established a Norwegian operation in 2013. This was at the activity peak of the Norwegian oil industry, and the shortage of qualified people meant it was difficult to find the right people who could really add value to a new player on the Norwegian Continental Shelf.

I advised on what type of people and skill was needed and how to build an organization to succeed in Norway, as well as working with the Japanese management team to ensure they were aware of the cultural differences between Japan and Norway. This meant working closely with the client's management team, aiding them in understanding how to approach the Norwegian marketplace and work with Norwegian candidates and subsequently Norwegian staff. At the same time we needed to ensure that we identified and presented candidates that understood the Japanese culture.

The cultural fit has been one of the major challenges recruiting for Japanese firms, and ensuring candidates truly understand what these differences actually means in everyday work is both difficult and crucial for a successful recruitment. In a capital intensive and high-risk industry like the oil industry, HQ in Japan will always be heavily involved in the local operations; often more so than other industries. Thus, the cultural awareness and sensitivity needs to be addressed as one of the key issues in any recruitment, both from a client management point of view as well as finding, attracting and selecting the right people to work for a Japanese firm.

Based on my experience serving Japanese corporations in Norway, some of the key cultural differences I always address are:

Hierarchy – Norway typically has an egalitarian driven culture and social structures

- This comes as a surprise to Japanese management, e.g. when everyone in the Norwegian organization speaks up and raises issues, perhaps especially when HQ are visiting.
- The formality that comes with the hierarchy is not something Norwegians are immediately comfortable with and will sometimes make them insecure.
- The Japanese bureaucracy can be overwhelming for Norwegians, especially the fact that decisions will be made in and by teams where the Norwegian employee have no access or voice.

Loosing face – admitting lack of knowledge or disagreeing in public

- Norwegians are more than willing to discuss and confront in public, this can feel very uncomfortable for the Japanese and the Norwegians will not understand the lack of willingness to discuss.
- The Japanese will avoid admitting to not knowing when there are more than two people present, i.e. it is crucial to really make sure a common understanding has been reached. This is often made more difficult by language barriers.

Quality – in all aspects vs the Norwegian culture of making drafts

- Norwegians can sometimes be perceived as informal – and are willing to present rapid suggestions even if it's still to be considered as “work in progress” – some will claim that people should be involved in the process. This can sometimes be misunderstood as a formal proposal rather than a “check in”.
- Norwegians are also often not shy to send a draft to top-management in order to get input, guidance and alignment, such drafts might very well be of a quality no Japanese employee would even consider sending to anyone. This can cause friction and misconceptions, especially working towards HQ in Japan.

Whilst there are many differences between the cultures, there are also some key similarities that stand out:

- Respect for the individual – looking after people and employees, and a sense of loyalty. Both cultures will try to avoid letting employees go and does not take as lightly to downsizing as is common in other countries.
- Integrity and business ethics – a stringent moral conduct and appreciation of what is good and bad
- Corporate social responsibility – realizing that a business is part of and interdependent on the society it operates in

Working for international corporations always brings some particular challenges, often related to communication and culture. Naturally this is also the case working with Japanese firms. However, as Japan has such a strong culture and traditions that transcend all aspects of society and business, it makes culture one of the key differentiating factors to a successful recruitment. In my experience this is more important than when one recruits from one western corporation to another western corporation.

As a consequence, all parties in an executive recruitment need to be culturally aware:

- **The hiring manager:** needs to understand and appreciate the differences and how to manage it, in the recruitment stages as well as a when the candidate joins the organization
- **The candidate:** needs to truly understand and respect the cultural differences, without losing sight of his/her own culture
- **The Executive Search consultant:** needs to manage and advise the client on the cultural issues that will affect the recruitment, as well as being able to judge whether or not a potential candidate has the necessary cultural awareness to succeed

An experienced and knowledgeable advisor can truly add value to recruitment process heavily influenced by cultural differences, but it is equally important to remember the similarities and common goals we share.