

ASIA'S AGEING WORKFORCE: THE EMERGING CHALLENGE FOR THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers some emergent problems Asian companies will need to address as their workforces continue to age. Human resource management practices will need to be adapted to ensure the skill levels of older workers are continually updated and that discrimination is not condoned. In many Asian countries policies are being developed and legislation enacted to protect older workers from age discrimination, and provide income support for those no longer able to find and maintain employment. Yet in Japan, where the numbers of ageing citizens exceed those of its child population, HR policies aimed to protect older employees are often circumvented in practice, and few other Asian countries enforce their anti-discrimination rules. The twin pressures of demographic reality and globalisation, and hence growing similarity of human resource practices across countries, should act in partnership to ensure that ageing is set to become both a political and industrial issue within twenty years. Together with child labour, ageing may replace gender as a key factor in the achievement of workforce diversity.

INTRODUCTION

While many western countries face the challenge of a rapidly ageing workforce, the majority of Asian economies, with the exception of Japan, have yet to confront the full implications of an ageing population and its potential impact on workforce management. Concepcion's (1995) analysis of 1994 United Nations data indicates that as the twenty-first century opens the numbers of elderly inhabitants will rise in all countries. In Japan expected numbers will exceed its child population, a situation without historical precedent in any country. In a chapter especially commissioned for a recent book on older workers, Li (1998) cites statistics for Asia's more dynamic countries, which indicate increasing numbers of people over 60. He cites Rosario (1994) who forecasts over sixteen percent of the population in Hong Kong will be aged over 60 by 2007; Woon (1994) who forecasts eleven percent of people over 60 in Singapore by 2000, and Yoon and Eun (1995) who report nine percent over 60 in South Korea in 1995. In Li's view a youthful, even though gradually ageing population, coupled with urbanisation and economic prosperity leading to higher disposable incomes, has resulted in significant changes in the structure of each of these newly industrialised nations. The implications of these trends impact all areas of life, placing increasing pressures on family situations, health systems, social security arrangements and workplaces.

This paper examines the consequences of population ageing for workforce management in Asia by comparing typical practices for managing older employees across a number of countries and discusses future challenges for Asian organisations. The 1997 financial crisis

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showed how when economic conditions deteriorate the vulnerability of older employees to losing their employment increases significantly (Samorodov 1999).

Vulnerability of older workers has been a feature of most Western countries during the last two decades. Older workers were particularly likely to lose their employment as global restructuring shifted employment opportunities to lower cost locations, and computer based technology increased its contribution to production and clerical activities. In the increasingly competitive climate many older workers found themselves unexpectedly becoming a liability to employers who were facing the necessity of having to reduce staff numbers and fund retraining. In a climate of economic recession and downsizing, large numbers were forced to consider early retirement. The practice became widespread in Western nations during the 1980s and 1990s (ABS 1998). Jobs held by older staff were either bought out through the use of early retirement incentives, or else older workers were made redundant (World Labour Report 1995).

Yet Asian employment was relatively unaffected prior to the 1997 economic crisis (ILO Report 1998-1999). Employment continued steady right up to the onset of the crisis, when Asia too began to experience economic downturn with consequent loss of jobs. Prior to 1997 economic growth had been consistently high buoyed by efforts in the Asian economy to incorporate joint ventures and foreign subsidiaries, as well as local firms.

Employment opportunities throughout Asia for those with appropriate skills were generally available. The influx of multinational firms contributed to development of human resource management policies that recognised the growing diversity of the global workforce. The aim was to ensure equity in comparison of employees across regions, maximise the benefits of diversity and reduce the costs (Sparrow, Schuler & Jackson 2000). Recruitment, performance appraisal, and work organisation were modified to fit the demands of the setting in which they were being applied (Moss Kanter & Dretler 2000). In particular many practices which challenged existing Asian practices of paternalism, family protection, lifetime employment, group harmony and reciprocal loyalty were expanded to incorporate Western practices that stressed individual achievement, clear performance standards and evaluation (Whitman 1999).

Increased numbers of organisations with Western style values gradually led to increasing adoption of strategies designed to recognise and reward individual contribution regardless of race, gender, or ethnicity. In countries such as Hong Kong and Japan, these movements coincided with the creation of new public structures to promote equality of opportunity and reduce the vulnerability of individuals from outside the dominant group. Public debate to examine the rights of women, children, older individuals, the disabled, and the unemployed was undertaken and in some cases their protection was enshrined in legislation. Such changes raised the awareness of diversity issues in the workplace, as well as in the broader society.

However, their impact on workplace practice has been less, and discriminatory practices against older individuals in the workforce have largely been ignored. There is some indication that this may be changing as Rubis (1998) reports a number of polls indicate concern among managers in different countries about the ageing of their population. Yet almost the first finding to confront anyone researching this area is the shortage of published material from within Asia. Economists (eg Heller 1998) have begun to research the longer term implications of demographic ageing for public policy, but there is almost nothing published on the

implications for human resource management. With the exception of Japan, the problem appears dormant. Yet within the next ten years new practices will be required.

The issue has begun to be addressed in consequence of the 1997 crisis as this delivered a severe economic shock to economies that had previously experienced decades of high growth. Unemployment and poverty soared (Lee 1998) with the most severely affected countries experiencing massive layoffs. Rodrick (1999) points out that few Asian economies had any system of social security transfer payment. Rather, lifetime employment and extensive labour market regulations had acted to try and protect the vulnerable. Yet in 1997 many families, who had been the traditional structure for caring for older relatives, were themselves facing economic hardship and less able to assist. The plight of the unexpectedly redundant older workers was raised as a political issue and governments in some countries (Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore) set up committees of inquiry to investigate the situation and make recommendations. To date, however, there has been little real change in policy. Lucas (1999) indicates that Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong are only now beginning to establish retirement funds to help underwrite the cost of servicing a growing older population and that Indonesia and Thailand are still planning to do so.

Recognition that the ageing workforce may pose a number of challenges for workforce management has been slow. The purpose of this paper is to compare typical practices for managing older workers across seven Asian countries — Japan, China, Singapore, Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia and Hong Kong and to suggest problems that will need to be addressed. All have relatively young workforces with the exception of Japan, whose demographic and economic history has been more akin to that of Western Europe and the United States.

Japan

Japan, unlike the rest of Asia, has been a major industrial power since the nineteenth century. Japanese society is long established and steeped in tradition. It is still one of the most industrialised and urbanised countries in Asia with the oldest population and the longest life expectancy (Concepcion 1995). The population is homogeneous with almost 99 percent of the workforce Japanese (Honda 1992). Throughout the period of economic growth which followed World War II, Japan's employment relations were exemplified by life time stable relationships between company and staff such that once hired, an employee could look forward to a slow but steady progress into middle management with gradually increasing salary entitlements. These practices were not prevalent throughout the entire labour system: they did characterise the public sector and the majority of large organisations and gradually became accepted as the standard from which other practices might deviate (Ouchi 1982). Wartime losses, low birth rates, and rapid industrial growth reinforced the need for pragmatic solutions to the severe labour shortages that arose in the 1950s. Underpinning such practices were a strong economy, growth oriented industries, and a social structure that favoured continuity, long-term relationships and reciprocal loyalties. Japan's buoyant economy was such that its growing organisations were able to absorb the expanding numbers of those aspiring to middle management positions.

In the 1990s, however, all this changed. Other countries, such as Korea and China, with lower production costs began to challenge Japan as the dominant manufacturer in Asia. A great earthquake in Hanshin in 1995 shook the economy. Speculative activity by Japan's financial institutions led to problem loans with huge debts and a subsequent tightening of credit. By the middle of the 1990s Japan had sunk into an economic depression, even further exacerbated by

currency devaluations elsewhere in Asia, and many companies sought to reduce their headcount of employees. In spite of the high value placed on their loyalty, older workers, many of whom had been with their employer for over twenty years as part of the core workforce, found themselves highly vulnerable. Suzuki (1996) reports increases in shoulder tapping of subordinates by senior managers asking older employees to resign, along with increases in the perception that older workers were marginal or window dressing. He adds that those who were lucky enough to find alternative employment (70 percent) did so under worsening terms. The higher the levels of their previous working commitment, the more difficult had been the transition. A major contributor had been Japanese work cultures that reinforced long hours spent in the workplace, regarded promotion as the most valuable outcome of working endeavour, and interfered with the development of a life outside the working environment. Unlike their predecessors, who entered their retirement years buoyed by the recognition of their previous service, many of those who retired in the late 1990s, did so feeling anxious disillusioned, and betrayed. Their plight has led to a gradual awakening within Japanese society of the need to encourage development of a more balanced lifestyle, where satisfaction could be pursued via number of coexistent, but nonetheless equally valuable, pathways rather than over-relying on the workplace.

China

China's economic reforms, first in agriculture then later the urban economy, began in the 1970s. It now operates as a market economy with a broad range of manufacturing and service activities and diversified ownership of the factors of production. Economic growth from 1970 has been spectacular, underpinned by the explosion in joint venture operations during the 1980s and 1990s, which were designed to transfer technology, influx capital, develop infrastructure, and provide access to export markets. Initially such joint ventures generated a number of staff management problems (Tsang 1994) in terms of recruitment, dismissal, remuneration, discipline, and skill development. Finding staff with scarce skills was not easy and getting approval for them to transfer from their old employer was complex and difficult. Without such approval they were unlikely to start. Firing could be even more difficult still if the employee's status were permanent. Remuneration contained many hidden payments including subsidised housing, which would substantively increase the cost of labour over and above direct employee earnings. Discipline was generally lax and poor productivity rarely punished. In addition, there were severe shortages of skilled labour and managerial talent. Educational preparation for working was low requiring significant investment in training programs.

Nowadays larger state owned firms, the backbone of the manufacturing sector, more closely resemble Western organisations (Benson & Zhu 1999) as human resource management practices undergo radical transformation. Substantial reform had been necessary in order to tackle rising levels of inefficiency and debt. Lim et al (1996) report over twenty new legislative initiatives were introduced into the area of employee relations in the 1990s, chiefly relating to the provision of base line services by employers and the establishment and operation of employee unions. Whereas earlier human resource management systems emphasised life-time employment (the so-called iron rice bowl approach), this has gradually been replaced with an employment system based on individual contracts.

Management and ownership reforms have been extensive and SOEs are now required to be profitable else they will be sold off or closed down. The combined effect of these reforms and the Asian financial crisis on employment has been brutal during the last three years. Benson

and Zhu (1999) indicate that by the end of 1998 over 17 million workers in SOEs had been laid off representing almost 20 percent of the total workforce. They estimated unemployment as between 4 and 23 percent, claiming non-renewal of contracts had been utilised to reduce numbers in some cases, government subsidies in others to absorb a degree of surplus labour, and in others a minority of former employees had received an incentive payment to give up their jobs. All initiatives were accompanied by extensive devolution of work responsibility and, in some cases, substantive increases in information processing and process technology.

What is unclear is whether older workers have borne more than their representative share of these downsizing initiatives, as has been the case in other countries. In China, fewer older people speak English and many have spent their formative years receiving only minimum educational preparation for the work environment and working within a planned economic structure which encouraged managers to be risk averse. Unlike the new generation (Martinsons 1999) they tend to be uncomfortable with a market economy, and prefer stability. Consequently they became prime targets as the skill requirements changed.

With the chronic shortage of skilled labour, especially in the ranks of senior management or technical fields, it is unlikely that those with scarce skills and broad experience would become unemployed. Unfortunately the numbers of older people with needed skills in problem solving, change management, and innovative thinking are few. Shortages of appropriately trained and skilled local staff has led to most managerial positions in joint ventures being filled by expatriate staff fluent in Mandarin from nearby countries. Though increasing trends toward localisation are apparent, McComb (1999) forecasts it is likely that entry or middle level positions will continue to be staffed by expatriates within the next ten years. A paradox thus emerged where a labour shortage, which theoretically could assist older staff find employment, has coincided with their obsolescence. Many older people are vulnerable, not so much because of their age, but because their skills are no longer relevant and retraining has not been available.

Singapore

Singapore's economic performance throughout the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s showed spectacular growth with GDP rising on average 8 percent each year. Associated prosperity meant high employment for all including older workers. This changed abruptly in the mid 1980s with a reduction in direct foreign investment leading many companies to reduce their labour force and thus to rising levels of unemployment. Given that pay systems were generally based on seniority, many organisations saw older workers as comparatively expensive, and an easy target as downsizing became widespread. Their vulnerability was magnified by being able to access their retirement funding once they had reached 55 years. Older workers bore the brunt of the economic downturn with their participation rates dropping significantly and those who became unemployed taking long periods to secure alternative work.

Prior to 1993 there was no mandatory retiring age though the usual custom was for organisations to retire their staff once they reached 55 years. In 1993 this was reset at 60 years. By the late 1990s, with rising levels of dependant older individuals, the Singapore government began to be concerned at the numbers of older persons no longer contributing to the labour market. They compared the situation unfavourably with that of their neighbours in Hong Kong, Korea and Taiwan where participation rates of older individuals were much higher. The Manpower Department was commissioned to make recommendations for the

future. Their research found that in 1998 Singapore's population contained 14 percent of individuals over 55 years. Of these, only about 65 percent of males are in the workforce and approximately 22 percent of females. Older workers are generally less well educated than their younger counterparts and thus more vulnerable to job loss and, if made redundant, to longer spells of unemployment. Their report sought ways to widen employment opportunities through re-education, career advice, employer subsidies, greater use of flexible working arrangements, and legislation to prohibit the more blatant forms of discrimination. In 1999 the retirement age was once again raised — this time to 62. Wage systems were restructured to separate salary and tenure so that long tenure (and thus being older) was no longer closely associated. Re-education was encouraged, funded largely by government subsidy, and employers were encouraged to introduce flexible work arrangements and partial retirement options. As yet, it is still too soon to evaluate the effectiveness of these initiatives.

Hong Kong

Hong Kong has traditionally provided more employment protection than its neighbouring developing economies. Privately owned enterprises have always dominated Hong Kong where principles of paternalism largely ensured that staff were taken care of by their employers. A 1996 survey (Heywood, Ho & Wei) indicated older workers, in the event they become redundant or the terms of their employment become changed (Cousins 1998), were generally protected, but they found it difficult to obtain re-employment if they became unemployed.

Until recently approximately only about one third of employees were covered by some form of superannuation saving, but legislation introduced in 2000 aimed to establish a new compulsory retirement savings scheme to ensure that all employees save for their retirement (Chapel 2000). Individuals and firms are expected to contribute equally to the proposed retirement fund. Thus, individuals will gradually take over from family as the responsible provider for their income as they grow older. There are no laws preventing age discrimination, though ordinances do exist to give employees proper notice, and severance payments

Indonesia, Korea and Malaysia

These countries are considered together, partly because their workforces are far younger than those of other Asian countries and partly because none of them have any legal mechanisms to protect older workers from age discrimination. All three countries suffered extensively following the 1997 crisis. Indonesia's economic suffering was the greatest and led to a heavy downward plunge with falling exchange rates, high inflation and soaring unemployment. Its employment environment exemplified heavy contrast between the highly regulated environment of the public sector and the almost unregulated environment of the informal sector and offered the most variable, complex, yet vague, working context in which to examine the situation facing older workers of any Asian country. In the public sector the conditions of workers' employment were prescribed in great detail and generally adhered to. Once their period of probation has been concluded the majority of staff was unlikely to be dismissed. Yet slightly less than half the workforce was so employed. The remainder worked in the informal sector with only minimal protection.

A similar contrast occurred in Korea between the chaebols or large conglomerates and the informal sector. Chaebols make up between 30—40 percent of GDP where employment is well regulated. The remaining informal sector consists of a vast array of smaller concerns

where employment practices are far less regulated. Malaysia's economy is characterised by a similar distinction between foreign firms or joint investment operations underpinning growing export led activities that have raised productivity levels and generated a labour shortage (Wan-Rafaei & Yip 1998), and an informal sector comprising largely locally owned firms. Research undertaken by Abdullah (1994) found that though foreign firms were offering opportunities to train middle level staff, local firms had few such schemes in place.

No age discrimination laws operate in Indonesia, Malaysia or Korea. However, given the low average age of these populations, there are relatively few older workers and thus the need to protect their employment has few supporters. Low education levels now, but especially so in the past, mean few older people have advanced skills unless they have participated in some form of retraining during their earlier career — a situation which is only likely to be true for those from wealthy backgrounds already working in skilled capacities. Those with few skills continue to work as long as their health permits. If still employed, they are more likely to be found in the informal sector, or if unemployed they may become part of an extended family support system, assisting other younger family members through child care and domestic activities. There is no mandated retirement age, though chaebol employees are expected to retire by age 55 and seek alternative employment. Relatively young early retirees may seek full time work in the less regulated sectors of the economy, thus putting added pressure on the labour market. As yet there is no social security system to assist older individuals who lose their employment, but there is growing recognition of the need to investigate the issue and develop some form of income support for those not working.

DISCUSSION

While it is unwise to generalise about human resource management practices across the entire spectrum of the differing economic, political, religious and cultural practice within Asia, nonetheless one can draw some comparisons. Managing diversity has become an emergent area of both research (Adler & Israeli 1994) and practice (Patrickson 2001) as new legislation is enacted in Hong Kong, China and Singapore to try to discourage discriminatory behaviours. In most countries the first diversity issue to be addressed was gender, but two new foci have begun to emerge in the last decade (O'Brien 2001). One of these is child labour, the other is population ageing. Though anti-discrimination legislation to date appears to lack force, increasing numbers of complaints and publicity are bringing slow awareness of change (Kramar 2001).

Before the entry of foreign firms, human resource management practices in Japan followed dominant societal values of reciprocal loyalty where both employees and employers acknowledged the long term nature of their relationship. In predominantly Chinese nations such as Singapore, Hong Kong and China the economy revolved largely around family organisations which practised Confucian values of harmony, paternalism and group structure. The dominance of small family concerns facilitated highly flexible employment arrangements for ageing relatives. Indonesia and Malaysia exhibited Islamic values and were characterised by a large public sector that offered lifetime employment in return for loyal service. Older workers in public employment or employed by large corporations were often guaranteed employment up until the normal retiring age and then separated with income provided in the form of a small pension. Most were subsequently either wholly or partially supported by their families, and often engaged in unpaid domestic service. In the informal

sectors of the economy older workers could choose to reduce hours worked with corresponding reduction in income.

But these practices can only be sustained as long as the numbers needing assistance are able to be supported by those providing assistance, and there are indications this watershed is gradually approaching. Strong and growing economies such as Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore are beginning to acknowledge the necessity to develop some form of income support for older citizens unable to find work. Governments in these countries are showing they are prepared to take the initiative to adopt some system of transfer payments to provide income for older individuals and relieve family burdens. Other countries such as Indonesia, given their proportion of older workers is lower and their economy is weaker, have more pressing problems.

Inevitable consequences for managing an ageing workforce have yet to be addressed. Almost certainly the present emphasis on recruitment and salary administration that addresses the issues more relevant to a younger workforce will need to change. Of more interest to older employees is the provision of continual retraining and development, the introduction of performance appraisal, attention to occupational health and safety and salary and benefits administration (Patrickson 2001). Western management practices in the form of jointly funded employer or employee superannuation schemes have led to a gradual transition towards more individuals taking responsibility for their own future and not relying solely on their family or the government for support in Japan, Singapore and Hong Kong. Thailand, and Malaysia are investigating similar provisions.

Workforce ageing will require a combination of approaches by government and individual enterprises to ensure that both economic and personal benefits are realised. If Asian nations were to follow Western models then governments will need to take on an educative role to protect the rights of minorities and ensure that discriminatory practices against the law lead to prosecution (Obrien 2001). Enterprises may need to examine their practices to place greater emphasis on what individuals can contribute and less on their age (Patrickson 1998).

What seems more likely is that Asian nations will develop their own solutions to the dilemma. Certainly one can anticipate increased government effort to provide forms of social security transfer payments to augment the incomes of those in need and to provide for those in retirement. Such is already underway. Changes in human resource management within organisations are similarly underway as more women achieve entry and promotion into senior management and older individuals begin to organise to seek greater equity.

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