

# Japanese Female Workers in the Course Management System

Kashii FUKAYA \*

## Abstract

Focusing on female workers who have been hired as managerial/supervisory staff in the Japanese workplace, I studied the laws and acts implemented to improve their situation, the objective and definition of the course management system and how controversial the system is. I discuss about women workers in the course management system through interviews with them who work for large Japanese trading firms and companies, about their actual work environment, starting with their work condition, salary, work content, career development, promotion and transfer opportunities.

Keywords; course management system, managerial/supervisory course, quasi-managerial course, specialist course, clerical course, tenure position

## 1. Introduction

From the second semester of the third year to the fourth year, most college students engage in the search for full time employment. It is a fierce race, especially for female students, as the race to get a full-time position is very competitive in Japan. Although the number of female employees hit 21,770,000 in 2003 as reported by JIWE (Japan Institute of Workers' Evolution), the rate of female full-time workers is 41.9% and the rate of part-time or outsourced female workers is 42.5%, which shows an obvious contrast to the rate of 67% male full-time workers and 13% part-time/outsourced male workers. Moreover, the ratio of women managers is reported by JIWE to be 1.2% among total companies in Japan in 2000.

Japanese companies have been attempting for over two decades to improve the work environment for female workers through gradual changes in their organizational structure. The Japanese government has

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\* 本学教授、Specialized Field: Business English and Business Communication

also contributed by enforcing the law of equalizing employment opportunity between men and women. The law was first put into effect in 1985 followed by a related amendment in 1986. Ten years later in 1997, the law was promulgated with a legal prohibit of the discriminative treatment of female workers in their employment, placement, promotion and any gender-based special treatments.

Despite the change made by companies and organizations, often brought on by legal actions, there still remains a gender gap in the employment condition for tenure positions. The criteria used to choose those who receive tenured positions is different for male workers and female workers and produces a biased consciousness in the Japanese workplace. Evidence of critical differences between employment criteria can be found in the fact that male college graduates are hired in one category for managerial/supervisory positions, whereas female college graduates are hired for either managerial/supervisory or clerical assistant positions; supervisory positions for female workers are far fewer than the clerical assistant positions. So, it remains the norm within the Japanese workplace for the majority of managerial/supervisory positions to be held by men. This often leads to communication problems between the few women managers and their male counterparts and clients.

I have focused on female workers who have been hired as managerial/supervisory staff and have been working as hard as their male counterparts in the Japanese workplace. I have interviewed a number of these women, who have been working for big Japanese trading firms and companies, about their actual work environment, starting with their work condition, salary, work content, career development, promotion and transfer opportunities. As well, I have enquired about their feelings towards satisfaction and dissatisfaction at work so as to know how they perform at work. With the results of these interviews, I will discuss the performance of Japanese female workers and the communication problems that they face in their workplaces.

## **2. Course Management System; the Definition, the Objective and the Diffusibility**

It is defined mainly in two courses: Managerial Position Course and Clerical Position course. The managerial position course includes a quasi-managerial position course and a specialist course. Personnel in this system are defined as full-time tenured workers engaged in managerial and administrative work and assisting managerial work with chances of nationwide transfers. Applicants

should be graduates from colleges or graduate schools. Positions in this category are usually classified into two categories, administrative and engineering work, at the time of employing new graduates. The quasi-managerial position course and specialist course included in this Managerial Position Course, have no chance of nationwide transfers, but there is a chance of transfer within limited regions. When employing others than new graduates, the position is often quoted as Specialist Position.

The clerical position course offers full-time tenured works in assisting work or clerical work without a chance of transfer. Chances of promotion to Managerial Position Course, after having passed some qualification examinations, are offered. Applicants can be either high school graduates or college graduates.

The objective of the system is to treat workers properly according to their will and capability regardless of gender. It is to manage the personnel in setting courses based on typical work contents or the courses set for the work including transfer or excluding transfer.

As for the diffusibility in Japan, the system was first introduced after 1986 when the Law of Equal Work Opportunity was first implemented. In 1992, the number of Japanese companies utilizing this course management system was less than 5% of total companies. But in 2000, the number increases to 25%. It has become popular among big companies having over 5,000 employees, as seen in the statistical figure that 50% of big companies were reported to be using the system in 1992, rising to 53% in 2000. Among them, finance and insurance companies in particular showed a strong growth, as 20% used the system in 1992 and 44% in 2000. (Fig. 1)

## **2. Women workers in the Managerial Position Course and Women Managers**

There is a difference in the ratio of women workers hired for the Managerial position course depending on the numbers of companies surveyed. JIWE '2000 reported only 3.5% of women workers are in the managerial position course. The servicing industries are ranked at the top, where 11.6% of women workers work in this managerial position course, followed by 5.6% for wholesale, retail and food & beverage companies. Their work is mainly in Sales/Marketing (24%), in R & D (20%) and in Sales/Service (16%).

The ratio of women managers, including group leaders, section chiefs, division managers and directors, is 47.2% for companies that utilize this course management system. The ratio, however, becomes as low as 1.2% when considering all of total companies in Japan. Each specific position is seen in Fig. 2.

According to a survey conducted by the Japan Institute of Labor in 2003 and distributed to companies asking about their Employment Details related to the Course Management System, 53% responded that they employed both men and women for the Planning and Managerial work positions with nationwide transfers, 25% responded that they employed only men and 22% responded that no employment was made in the year surveyed. For the Planning, Managerial work with limited regional transfers, 42% responded that they employed both men and women, 8% responded that they employed only men, 8% responded they employed only women and 42% responded that no employment was made. For the Specialist work, 56% responded they employed both men and women, 6% responded they employed only men, 6% responded they employed only women and 32% responded they had no employment. For the Clerical work without transfers, 49% responded they employed both men and women, 6% responded they employed only men, 20% responded they employed only women and 26% responded no employment was made.

The above 2003 survey shows that there is a steady increase in employing both men and women for the managerial position including the quasi-managerial position course and specialist course as well as clerical position course. The problem is seen in the ratio of 25% who answered they employ only men for the managerial position with nationwide transfers and 20% who answered they employ only women for clerical work position.

### **3. Controversial Course System and Women Workers' Problem at Work**

The system is very controversial showing two opposite views among corporate employers, employees and researchers.

Positive supporters regard the system as a way to promote women workers properly. They say that it is the woman who has a right to choose either Managerial or Clerical position at the time of the

employment interview so that a woman who intends to work longer can work just as equally as a man. Above all, they insist that the course system is made to overcome the statistical gap between the much shorter length of women worker's work year and that of men.

On the other hand, critics insist that it is a system that discriminates against women workers legally, because the system does not function well. There are many companies that employ only men for the managerial position course.

As for the corporate policy to promote women in the managerial position course, JIWE'2000 reported that responding companies are trying to treat women positively, such as elevating capable women positively (65.6%), giving no special treatment in favor of one gender (53.0%), offering the same transfer chances (49.3%), enlarging work position for women to management line (35.6%), and replenishing OJT and education for women (30.1%). However, 30% answered that it is difficult to promote women to higher positions due to their much shorter working periods compared to men. Despite this belief though, the continuing rate of women in the course, JIWE report in 2000 shows a sharp ascending line from 50% in 1993 to 92.5 % in 1999. This figure indicates the fact that most women who are employed for the managerial position course continue their work. Women workers in the course are motivated to do worthwhile work, to exert their own skills and capabilities, and to do responsible work in managerial position course. The clerical work seems not what they want to do.

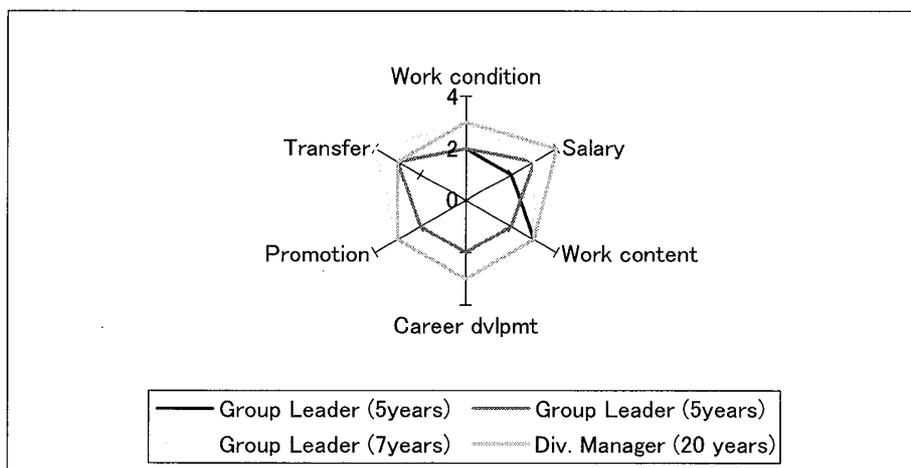
The report also shows women workers' strong dissatisfaction with corporate policy related to promotion, salary and work assignment. (Fig. 3) A total of 60.6% of women workers in the managerial position course including staff, group leaders, section chiefs and division managers or above, feel that they are not treated on equal terms with their male coworkers. Many women in the course think that a strong will power is essential for them to continue their work, followed by a proper corporate climate for women, superior's positive attitudes to utilize women and motivating work.

#### **4. A Case Study of Women Workers in Managerial Position Course**

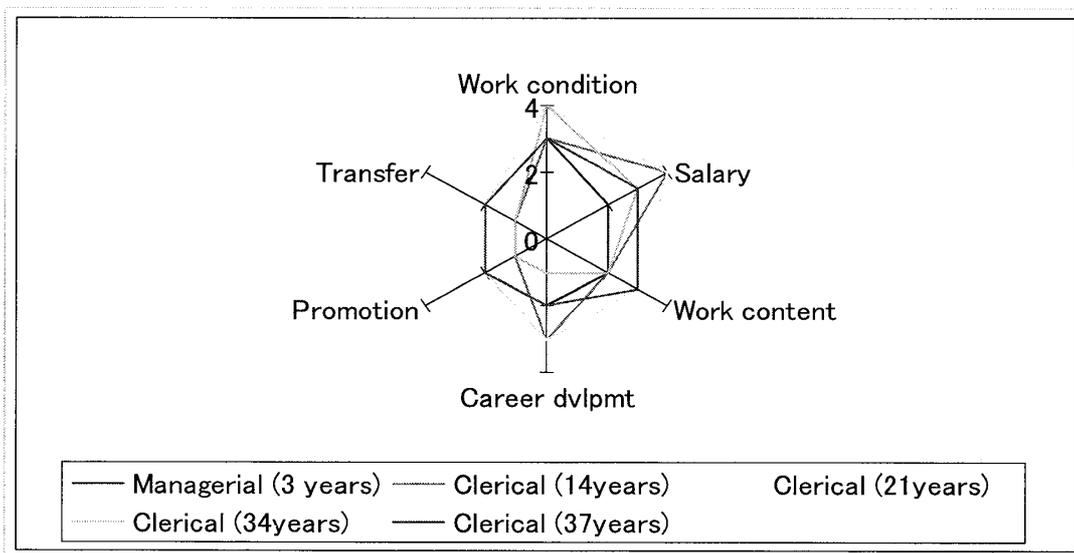
Questionnaires on four levels of satisfaction about their work conditions, salary, work content, career development, and promotion and transfer opportunities were emailed to participants and collected at the interview. <sup>1</sup> Out of nine interviewees representing two major companies in Nagoya, Japan, four women

work for the world’s biggest computer company (Company A) as sales/engineering specialists (three group leaders and one deputy division manager) which is a quasi-managerial position and five woman work for a leading Japanese firm (Company B). One works for the managerial position course and four work in the clerical position course.

The level of satisfaction of the four women workers in Company A is shown as follows. The graph seems somehow even with un-swayed variables; the deputy division manager whose work career is over 20 years, is much more satisfied in most items than other three group leaders whose work career range from five to seven years.



The level of satisfaction of the five women workers in Company B is shown below; the graph shows uneven variables extremely inclining to salary. One woman for managerial position course shows her dissatisfaction evenly and other four women in clerical position course show that they are very much dissatisfied with their promotion and career development opportunities.



Following is a closer inspection of the two women in the managerial position course who represent their generation. One is aged 42. She was employed in the managerial position course immediately after the implementation of the Equal Opportunity Law in 1986. Having over 20 years work career, she is now working as a consulting solution sales specialist in the sales division (equivalent to deputy division manager). The other is a young woman aged 25 who has been employed three years in the managerial position course and is now working in the risk management team, finance division; their self evaluations are examined as follows.

The older woman, a deputy div. Manager, is mostly satisfied, she is especially satisfied with her present salary because she was promoted recently. She considers her work to be very hard but motivating. It took 10 years for her to build the present career. She thinks men are offered more varieties of career developing models than women. She seems to be glad to be transferred to the region wherever she wants; especially she wants to be transferred to Tokyo where she expects more career developing chances. Her next goal is to develop her own management career.

In contrast, the young one is mostly unsatisfied. She complains of her company's corporate culture with its seniority system, the same starting salary for young employees, no consideration of individual desire and hope. She strongly criticizes that her company often evaluates personnel unequally, and that the chance of overseas transfers and career development is always made by gender or marital status. Her next goal is to get an MBA, to be assigned as an overseas representative, and to join the management line.

## **5. Conclusion**

Japanese female workers in the managerial position course are steadily increasing: the ratio among total workers in the managerial position is reported to be 3.5%. Although the ratio varies depending on participating numbers of companies, the ratio of female workers in the managerial position course is still low. A discriminative work environment still affects promotion opportunities, career development and evaluation, practices, such as employing only men, maintaining seniority priority for promotion opportunities, and giving married male employees priority for overseas job assignments, still continue

in some companies.

The course management system proved to be effective for improving the women employees' work environment to a certain level. However, the system involves negative aspects like preventing female workers from applying for the managerial position course and fixing the clerical workers' position so that female workers' incentives for work content, career development, and promotion opportunities are very limited in a work range, producing some feelings of discrimination, causing some female workers to lose their motivation in the workplace. Even after the implementation of the law of equal employment opportunity, women workers still need to improve their situation by having strong will power, and confronting improper and conservative attitudes taken by their male superiors at work.

My case study showed an interesting contrast in the satisfaction level between two females in the managerial position course: a woman manager who works for a major computer company and a young woman employee who works for one of the biggest Japanese firms with global business offices. It might be expected that their satisfaction level would differ according to their age, career length and personality. However, there is a similarity of dissatisfaction between them. They both criticize their superior's/company's attitudes and the human resource management system. They are criticizing Japanese corporate culture. This indicates a key for the corporate personnel management system to evaluate capable women more effectively, regardless of their age, marital status, etc. The case study proved that most women in the clerical position course suffer from a lack of promotion opportunities and career development opportunities, while many of them are satisfied with their salary and work conditions.

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Appendix

Fig. 1: Companies with Course Management System in 2000 (Reported by Japan Institute of Workers' Evolution)

■ with the course system □ without the course system.

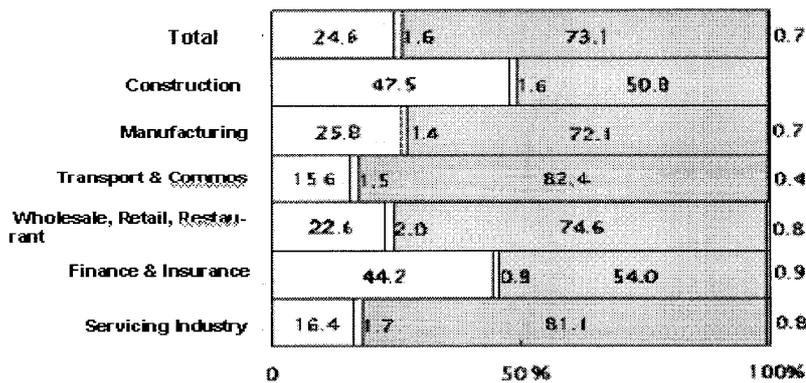


Fig. 2: Women Managers in Managerial Position Course (Reported by JIWE'2000)

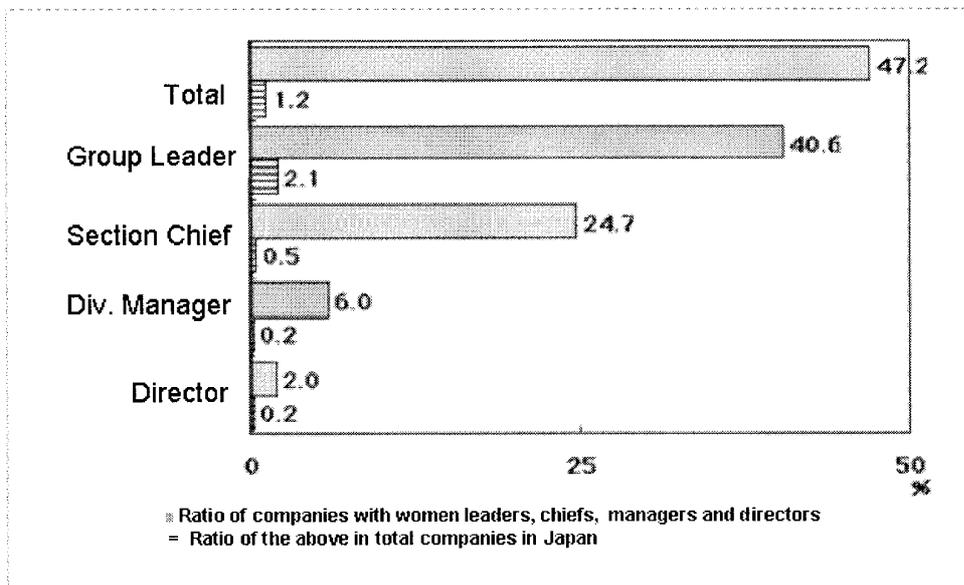
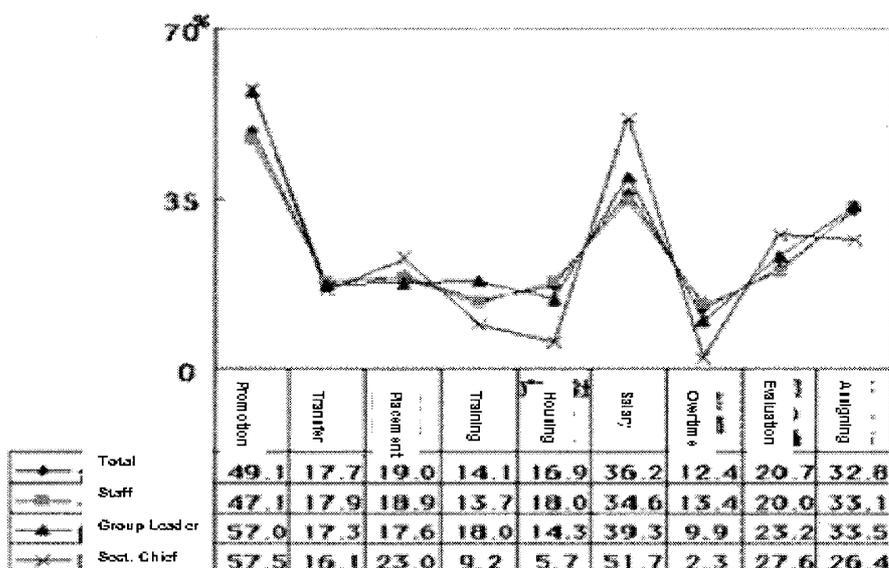


Fig. 3: Level of Dissatisfaction of Women Workers in Managerial Position Course (Reported by JIWE'2000)



<sup>1</sup> Date: October, 2006

Survey Method: Interview and questionnaire of Four Levels of Satisfaction about Work condition, Salary, Work content, Career development, Promotion opportunities, and Transfer opportunities.

Four Levels of Satisfaction: 4 (Very Satisfied), 3 (A Bit Satisfied), 2 (A Bit Unsatisfied), 1 (Very Unsatisfied)

Interviewer: Kashii FUKAYA

Interviewee: Nine full-time women workers in tenure position

Four women specialists in IBM Japan: Two system engineers and two sales engineers. All are employed in the managerial position course.

Five women workers in a big trading firm (Mitsubishi Shoji Corporation): One woman in finance dept. employed in 2003 in managerial position course and four women in sales dept. employed in 1969, 1972, 1985, 1992 in clerical position course.