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Japanese business communication in the COVID crisis: A study of horenso and its implications

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Abstract

Horenso is a widely known concept in Japan yet under-researched system of communication specific to the nation. It refers to a continual and collaborative communication process that involves frequent status updates for consultative decision-making. This study explores its significance in the context of Japanese business and its implications that may help gain insights for future use. The aim of this research is to envisage Japanese style communication in the post-COVID era by investigating their current practice during the pandemic. This chapter will begin with a review of relevant concepts and position horenso as an attribute of the wider context of Japanese employment connected with the regional values of preference. The case examples and the subsequent discussions further develop the concept of horenso by bridging business studies, cultural studies, and Japanese studies and reveal that horenso can be perceived as part of the Japanese decision-making process in the nexus of the organizational systems. Distinguishing between culturally driven specificities and cultureless ones, this study predicts that horenso, which prefers face-to-face communication and continues to hold its importance through the pandemic, will remain in the post-pandemic era alongside the internet-based video conferencing platforms.

Keywords: business communication, cultural values, decision making, Japanese style management, lifetime employment, teleworking

1.0 Introduction

Since the outbreak, many research efforts have been made worldwide to gauge the impacts of COVID-19 and establish strategies to cope with the pandemic. One strategy to contain the spread of the virus is social distancing, which has inevitably hampered social activities in most sectors across the world. Under these circumstances, teleworking has gained popularity more than ever. In most cases, it is forcibly introduced to employees with no prior remote work experience (Waizenegger et al., 2020). The massive expansion of teleworking may be considered a global-scale experiment (Sostero et al., 2020). In the USA, the Telework Enhancement Act of 2020 provides the federal definition: “The term telework or teleworking refers to a work flexibility arrangement under which an employee performs the duties and responsibilities of such employee’s position, and other authorized activities, from an approved worksite other than the location from which the employee would otherwise work” (United States Government Publishing Office, 2010; p. 1). The definition gives general ideas on the term.

The extent to which an employee can work offsite is often referred to as teleworkability: It is a newly emerged term defined as “the technical possibility of providing labor input remotely into a given economic process” according to European Commission’s working paper (Sostero et al., 2020; p. 29). Teleworkability varies depending on various factors. At the macro level, it correlates with the industry, to which the employer belongs. The top three sectors with the highest teleworkability are IT and communication, knowledge-intensive services, and education (Sostero et al., 2020; p. 10). Besides sectorial classification, the type of work can be the determinant. Labor intensive occupations, such as nurses and production line workers, cannot be performed remotely with the available technologies (Sostero et al., 2020; p. 6). This chapter focuses on occupations in business sectors with a reasonable level of teleworkability.

As for Japanese business, local scholars have carried out a series of studies on the challenges that the Japanese companies have been facing. The main findings include the significance of difficulty communicating between employees in organizations (Hara et al., 2020; Hattori et al., 2020; Sasaki et al., 2020). Research shows that the Japanese companies see it as a major challenge or at least something critical despite the availability of internet-based communication tools. This finding seems to have important implications because communication difficulty generally does not appear to be as equally critical in studies administered outside Japan: instead, the issue of mental and physical health is frequently discussed as the major theme (Waizenegger et al., 2020). This cross-country difference has become the origin of research interest for this study.

In Japan, the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (“MHLW”)¹ provides a comprehensive portal website dedicated to teleworking. One of the Q&A descriptions in their webpage for frequently asked questions offers a clue to the cross-country difference of communication. The question reads: How can I do *houkoku*, *renraku*, and *sodan* when teleworking (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2020)? Similarly, Japanese media features the issue: *Nikkei*, the prominent newspaper in the nation, writes that when teleworking, you should be mindful of *houkoku*, *renraku*, and *sodan* more than usual (Nihon Keizai Shimbun, 2020; p. 1). The keywords, *houkoku* (reporting), *renraku* (contacting), and *sodan* (consulting), are usually called *horenso*, which is an acronym consisting of the first syllables of the three words (Kameda, 2013). *Horenso* is a widely known term in Japan yet under-researched system of communication specific to the nation. This chapter focuses on *horenso*: its significance in the context of Japanese business and its implications that may help gain insights into the future trajectory of the communication system. The aim of this study is to envisage Japanese style communication in the post-COVID era by investigating their current practice during the pandemic.

The literature suggests that *horenso* is a regionally peculiar system coexisting with the locally shared values of preference (Kameda, 2013). Such regional values are often referred to as cultural constructs at the individual level (Thomas and Peterson, 2017). This chapter will begin with a review of relevant concepts and position *horenso* as an attribute of the wider context of Japanese employment connected with the regionally shared ways of thinking. Supported by interview data available to the public, the case examples will reveal that the system of *horenso* can be perceived as part of the Japanese decision-making process. By bridging business studies, cultural studies, and Japanese studies, this chapter will develop the concept of *horenso* and predict that *horenso* will remain in the post-pandemic era alongside the internet-based video conferencing platforms that have already gained popularity today.

2.0 Literature Review

Originally coined in the business sector, the term *horenso* is frequently and especially heard in empirical settings. The history of *horenso* dates to at least Japan’s boom times and possibly further back. Tomiji Yamazaki, President of Yamatane securities at that time, first wrote a book about *horenso* in the late 1980s (Yamazaki, 1989). It is considered the groundbreaking work in the sense that it conceptualized the term and made it popular. While Yamazaki can be the father of the term, some form of *horenso* is likely to have existed in Japan. Before Yamazaki wrote his book, many scholars carried out research on Japanese business in the past. Early prominent researchers include James Abegglen, Michael Yoshino, and Peter

¹ Translated by the author. No official English translation is available. All Japanese materials are translated to the best knowledge of the author.

Drucker to name a few who introduced Japanese style management in English to the West². Citing Abegglen (1958), Yoshino (1968), Cole (1971), and Dore (1973), Beechler et al. (1996; p. 3) write of the following critical differences found in Japanese business as compared to their Western counterparts: “more frequent use of consultative decision-making practices, higher frequency of communication, lifetime employment, long-term planning horizons, generalist career paths, quality control circles, and implicit informal control mechanisms”. Among these, consultative decision-making and frequent communication appear to be practically what is now called horenso. The idea here is similar to how the practice of kaizen attracted attention in the West: Masaaki Imai first wrote a book about kaizen in English (Imai, 1986). This book is considered the groundbreaking work worldwide that made it popular. While Imai’s work is an important milestone, the Japanese have been practicing kaizen before the publication of Imai’s work. This chapter refers to Japanese communication with the long-standing features as horenso for discussion purposes. Another feature of horenso is that Japanese business does not require it for all decisions as Beechler et al. (1996; p. 3) point out “more frequent use” of horenso than the West. The difference of frequency is relative yet significant. For instance, the IT societies are often required to make quick decisions on the spot in accordance with the available technology in most countries including Japan.

Literature concerning horenso is limited. Among available works, Kameda (2013) offers helpful discussions on the concept: It can be described as “a continual and collaborative communication process between superiors, subordinates, and colleagues over the course of a project” (Kameda, 2013; p. 9). This chapter provisionally borrows this description and attempts to develop it. Regarding the three words that constitute the term, houkoku means “reporting to supervisors on the progress, changes, if any, and result of your work in a timely manner when and if instructions and/or orders are given by supervisors” (Kameda, 2013; p. 9). This description appears reasonable but suggests one way communication from subordinates to supervisors. On the other hand, Yamazaki’s original work promotes honest information sharing regardless of job titles (Yamazaki, 1989). This chapter does not reject Kameda’s description but presupposes that horenso may involve two-way communications between supervisors and subordinates or between employees across the organization.

The preceding description of horenso probably makes sense and poses nothing foreign to most professionals regardless of their national origin. However, Kameda (2013; p. 10) adds “Horenso is a typical business communication practice peculiar to Japanese culture”, suggesting that horenso or some elements of it are specific to Japan and the precise equivalent(s) may not exist in other countries. This important point needs to be addressed before proceeding. Literature offers cautionary notes regarding translation of and discussion on regionally specific practice. Miyashita and Russell (1994; p. 7) provide a useful example: “The word keiretsu does not translate neatly into English, and that is the beginning of the problem”. It does not translate neatly because there is no exact equivalent of the form keiretsu in the English-speaking countries. It is problematic in a cross-national setting because the lack of a precise equivalent makes discussion harder. This chapter refers to this issue as the lack of mutual knowledge. The closest equivalent of keiretsu in English can be strategic alliance, which may be used for explanatory purposes. Nevertheless, strategic alliance in the English sense is “far from being Japanese-style horizontal keiretsu” (Miyashita and Russell, 1994; p. 208). As discussed earlier, the word horenso is an acronym consisting of the first syllables of three words: houkoku (reporting), renraku (contacting), and sodan (consulting). Each of these English translations of the Japanese words gives ideas on the concept but may not perfectly convey what horenso is. Regionally specific terms may be translated as guidance into English,

² The terminologies *West* or *Western* and *East* or *Eastern* and are used for discussion purposes only, as they can be further subcategorized in many ways. Refer to the J-system (the Japanese corporate system) vs. the W-system (the corporate system found in the West) in Aoki and Dore (1994) for similar use.

but their semantic fields are not always identical to the closest possible translations. To tackle the challenging issue, the following section will establish a theoretical foundation for this research.

3.0 Theoretical Framework

Arie de Geus (2002) writes about the useful concept of an entity's persona, originally coined by a famous German psychologist, William Stern, who developed the intelligence quotient (IQ) formula. "To Stern, each living being has an undifferentiated wholeness, with its own character, which he called the persona" (de Geus, 2002; p. 84). To explain the concept, de Geus introduces a vertical ladder that William Stern drew in 1919. The ladder has five levels, namely Deity/Divinity/Godhead being on the top row, followed in descending order by Nation, Tribe, Family and Individual placed on the lowest row, each of which is "a persona in its own right" (de Geus, 2002; p. 87). Borrowing Stern's idea, de Geus illustrates a company's organizational structure, using a ladder with seven levels, namely Society being on the top, followed in descending order by Corporation, Company, Division, Work Group, Team, and Individual. The idea of a ladder with multi-level personas corresponds with prevalent concepts in the literature. For example, Williams and Zumbansen (2011) write about "embeddedness" that signifies the connection between the levels of personas in the whole. According to Williams and Zumbansen (2011), institutions and markets are embedded in a society and manifest social values, and that is why those cannot be discussed in isolation from social values. Social values include regional values of preference and locally normative ways of thinking that generally belong to an individual-level persona. Institutions and markets are considered constituents of personas sitting at the higher levels than the individual level. Stern's idea is 100 years old yet appears to stand today. This chapter refers to the idea of a ladder as intrinsic connection (Kitamura, 2020) and assumes that the personas mutually support each other for their coexistence. For this reason, the whole is in equilibrium and the personas are stable though not immutable.

Japanese-related studies, broadly conceived, offer the following examples of the "institutions and markets" (Williams and Zumbansen, 2011) in the nation: lifetime employment, the form of keiretsu, and the main bank system (Abegglen, 2006). All of these stand with the intrinsic connection, not supported by legal contracts. For instance, the system of lifetime employment ("LTE") is "better understood as a long-term commitment between workers and employers rather than a permanent employment contract" since in Japan "the employment contract includes no explicit clause regarding this policy, and employers are under no obligation to guarantee employment" (Ono, 2010; p.2). Peter Drucker, the renowned scholar in the field of business management, once discussed Japanese style management with reference to LTE:

Suppose that we have a gathering of Westerners and Japanese. When asked what one does, a Westerner usually answers, 'an accountant' while a Japanese would most probably say '[I am working for] Toyota'. Introducing not one's profession, but one's organization shows that each individual member of a Japanese organization has a kind of family consciousness. Here lies the greatest strength of Japan. (Drucker, 2005)

This comment has three topics: 1) Japanese professionals ascribe their identity to their employer, rather than their profession, 2) the idea of family consciousness is generally shared within the nation, not just Toyota, and 3) Japanese family consciousness is their value of preference that is considered their strength. This interpretation never means that Japanese business is unconditionally stronger than others. This chapter presupposes that, like humans with character, societies have personas that come with unique strengths and weaknesses. Kameda (2013; p. 12) elaborates on the idea of family consciousness: "These words aptly describe Japan's collectivist culture". This country-level view corresponds with the cultural concepts, including individualism and its opposite, collectivism ("I/C"), much discussed in cultural studies

(Thomas and Peterson, 2017). The term culture calls for careful handling, but research indicates that the Japanese generally prefer their collectivistic values of preference. A plain way of expressing collectivism is the primacy of collective interest (Livermore, 2015). The value of family consciousness can be described as the primacy of collective identity of Toyota. This primacy coexists with the system of LTE. On the other hand, in the English-speaking countries, professionals generally prefer such attributes as an accountant and an engineer. This value of preference suits the system of arm's-length employment ("ALE"), where individuals ordinarily change their jobs (Riordan, 2014). The employer's name is naturally unlikely to be an individual's identity with the ALE preference, or the primacy of individualistic interest of job freedom. This chapter refers to the existing values of preference as cultural values. This term includes "social values" (Williams and Zumbansen, 2011) in the preceding discussion. Cultural values are subsumed under the cultural constructs, including I/C, which is this study's focus. Individualism and collectivism are two extremes of a linear scale for capturing and comparing the actual specificities - regionally shared ways of thinking - sitting on the scale between the extremes. Cultural specificities, such as LTE and ALE linked with the local cultural values, are referred to as culturally driven. Examined earlier, identity is a culturally driven attribute of the persona. I/C is one of the individual-level persona's characteristics. Cultural values are diffused ways of thinking that do not strictly nor equally apply to all individuals in the respective societies. Cultural values and personas are interlinked in the respective societies as mentioned earlier. The term cultureless is used for any specificity irrelevant to the cultural constructs reported in cultural studies. Cultureless factors include regulatory changes and technological advances. Cultureless practices tend to be internationally uniform because they are remote from the cultural values that make a difference of practice. Culture is not the sole determinant of social activities but can function as an influential driver alongside cultureless factors in the respective societies. With this force, the varieties of personas, including LTE and ALE, exist across societies. Culturally driven practices and cultureless practicalities are dynamic. This study focuses on culturally driven practices and regards the intrinsic link between the levels as its core element of theoretical framework. Having established the theoretical foundation, the following section will explore the related organizational systems and practices.

4.0 Case Illustrations

This section will examine two short case examples: before and after COVID. The two examples do not relate to each other but share the theme of horensō. The focus of this comparison is what has remained, rather than what has changed, before and after the pandemic in the context of Japanese business. With this focus, this section will examine what is likely to remain and envisage the future of the Japanese communication system. The first example narrates an unsuccessful story about newly hired CEO at the Dutch office of a Japanese conglomerate. The purpose of this example is to have a reasonable understanding of horensō by knowing about the differences of communication. Created from a real story (Japan Consulting Office, 2021), this example is short yet contains several important implications:

A major Japanese company's European operation hired their first non-Japanese CEO to replace incumbent Japanese CEO. New CEO, James, had only worked for American and European companies prior to this appointment. Soon after hiring James, the Japanese company's head office in Japan started receiving much less information than before. The head office and the Japanese expatriates ("expats") working at the European office kept asking James for information. James did not share information as requested because he had never done so in his years of professional life. The requested amount of information was too much for him. For the Japanese, it was necessary to know what and how he was doing. The head office became suspicious that James was not transparent about information sharing. At the same time, James became more and more frustrated with the Japanese company's micromanagement. James believed that he could

do his job in his way. He was confident about the European office's progress that would be shown in the upcoming financial report. However, his relationship with the head office became worsened without mutual trust. The head office let him go before the fiscal end.

This example highlights three differences of communication: 1) the required amount of information, 2) the frequency of information sharing, and 3) the purpose of information sharing. The required amount and frequency are relatively larger and higher, respectively, in the Japanese communication system. The Japanese purpose of information sharing appears to be a status update, which is generally not required in Europe or the English-speaking countries. These characteristics illustrate the horensō system.

The next example is created from a peer-reviewed article (Suematsu, 2020) in a Japanese business magazine about a Japanese start-up, Daftcraft. Established in 2018, this company is small with seven employees (Daftcraft, 2021). The company is featured in the article for their unique and timely feature: They have no physical office. This example narrates their story based on the interview with Mr. Wataru Hanashima, founder and President:

I established this company with my friends. All employees work remotely. We offer technology-oriented services including visualization solution and extended-reality content development. We create interesting and inspiring products. One of our employees enjoy having two places in different cities for living. Before the pandemic, we rented an office room or gathered in a nice park to have a meeting. I foster different lifestyles that we have. We trust each other but we cannot do our job without good communication. Horensō is vital for telework. We have minimum necessary rules: a mandatory weekly online meeting. Prior to the meeting, everyone writes in Google Hangouts Meet about what is done this week and what to do next week. Besides this, each team has a weekly meeting of their own. We use Slack for daily communication and Jira for progress management. There are many digital tools available for communication. What is important is how to use them, rather than which one to use. Horensō is most important for remote work. Full-time employees share an update with everyone else at least once a day. For sodan (consultation), I step in and have a one-on-one online meeting, as necessary.

This short example underscores the same points as the first one from a pre-pandemic time: the amount of information, the frequency of information sharing, and the purpose of horensō that seems to pertain to the process, rather than the outcome. These shared points may help envisage the future of Japanese business communication.

There is a useful work to synthesize the preceding examples. Yoshihiko Masuda, a Japanese national who served as CEO for two of the Fujitsu conglomerate's American affiliates between 2004 and 2019, contributed a short article to a Japanese magazine locally published in the United States. Written from a Japanese viewpoint, this work offers lessons and tips for Japanese expats regarding how to manage business operations in the United States. The following is abridged from the article (Masuda, 2014):

In Japan, horensō is important. In the United States, it is not. Sometimes they come to you but it is not for horensō. You get a request for a pay raise or a notice of resignation instead. American employees believe that horensō (frequent reporting and consulting) is a waste of time for your boss. If they find themselves unable to fulfill the professional responsibility on their own, they will eventually come to you. This is called an escalation.

This quote effectively explains why horensō is not necessary in the United States. The cross-national differences of communication seem to correspond with the shared elements from the first two examples. Table 9.1 summarizes the elements of communication in the respective societies:

Insert Table 9.1 here

The standard communication system in the English-speaking societies is referred to as arm's-length communication following the concept of arm's-length employment. The case examples suggest that the communication features are likely to remain after COVID-19 since they are present during the pandemic. The following section will discuss the future trajectory based on the critical elements of communication.

5.0 Discussions

The previous section has reported on the case examples that support the multi-level framework with the intrinsic connection to link the personas in the respective societies. This section will discuss this chapter's contribution: developing the concept of horensō and predicting its position in the post-pandemic era. Table 9.2 is a summary of the relevant concepts from the case examples and prior literature:

Insert Table 9.2 here

Horensō can be positioned as an important attribute of the persona of the Japanese institutions. More precisely, the feature of horensō - reporting, contacting, and consulting - are the representative features of Japanese decision-making that respects a group consensus. These features correspond with relevant literature. Taplin (1995) writes a book *Decision-making and Japan* that examines the intrinsic connection between the cultural values and the decision-making process:

In Japan, action or implementation of ideas takes place before the formal decision is announced. This occurs because the impact stage happens before action is announced formally. The informal decision-making stage in a Japanese organization is a continuous process in which information is gathered and discussed.... Such forms of all-encompassing communication allow both greater individual participation in the solution and an increased likelihood that action will be implemented effectively because there is a group consensus. Such behavior, which derives from groupism and egalitarian ranking, is contra-distinction to the Western decision-making method in which a quick decision, usually involving very few people, tends to be followed by implementation and then evaluation. Within the Japanese context, extensive evaluation occurs first in an egalitarian corporate group process that eventually leads to action. (Taplin, 1995; p. 25)

In this quote, the term groupism is theoretically identical to collectivism. The term egalitarian ranking, also referred to as vertical egalitarianism in her book, denotes the one "in which people tend to be seen both in a ranked hierarchy and with a great emphasis on discipline, on serving, with the customer ultimately being the most important person" (Taplin, 1995; p. 46). Vertical egalitarianism is one way of describing the typical Japanese corporate structure organized under the system of LTE. It tends to have a tall hierarchy resulted from being a quasi-eternal community with relatively low employee turnovers. A group consensus can be expressed as the primacy of collective interest of respecting all collective member's opinions for decision-making. In this description, collective members primarily refers to those who are involved in it and who belong to any teams potentially relevant to the decision, depending on the significance of the decision. The point here is that horensō takes place to reach a group consensus before the decision is officially made. Taplin's analysis mirrors the intrinsic connection between the

Japanese cultural value of collectivism and the decision-making process as a culturally driven practice. As for the Western system, “the company tends to be managed by objectives rather than consensus” (Taplin, 1995; p. 25). The arm’s-length principle (“ALP”) best explains it. The shared preference of the ALP is their cultural value.

The case examples show that the horenso communication system has remained. What has changed is the mode of communication. Due to the pandemic, face-to-face communication has greatly decreased and digital tools, such as Zoom, have grown to replace it. Persol Research and Consulting Co., Ltd. (“Persol”), a major consulting firm in Japan, has carried out research pertinent to horenso in the context of this transition. Conducted in March 2020, their research collected 2,700 responses from 1,000 teleworkers, 1,000 non teleworkers who have a teleworking colleague, and 700 managers who oversee teleworkers. Their research results can be shown as Table 9.3:

Insert Table 9.3 here

Table 9.3 is useful in that the results analyzes the frequency of communication channels used for each purposes of communication: houkoku, renraku, and sodan. Face-to-face communication is most suitable for horenso. This explains the Japanese view examined at the outset: The pandemic has posed a relatively high level of communication challenges from the Japanese standpoint. Their results show that email and telephone are mainly used for horenso in the early stage of the pandemic. On the other hand, web or video conferencing channels are not primarily used for horenso. This result seemingly contradicts the current popularity of web conferencing. The web platforms might have not been as pervasive at the time of their research. Horenso usually comes with delicate topics. One possible implication is that telephone and email, possibly combined, may better suit horeso, which entails intensive two-way communication. Video/web conferencing may be suitable for one-way communication or soft two-way communication: for example, a CEO’s speech remotely made for satellite offices. Another potential reason is that telephone and email are possibly considered real, as opposed to virtual means. However, this conjecture may be overturned as the web platforms gain further popularity. To sum up, horenso has remained today and face-to-face communication best suits it.

Abegglen (2006) provides helpful insights into how Japanese business has changed and will change: “Where people matter, adaptive change has occurred but within very clear cultural constraints” (2006; p. 9). Abegglen’s idea suggests that culturally driven practices will not radically change as the stable cultural values function as constraints. The idea supports this study’s concept of intrinsic connection. It also functions as cultural constraints as it presupposes that the personas are interconnected between the levels for their coexistence. The concept here appears to suggest that face-to-face communication is likely to be the primary means for horenso in the future. While so, cultureless activities, including non horenso communication, will likely foster web conferencing as it is seen at present. Taken together, culturally driven practices, such as horenso, are likely to remain in the future. Cultureless practices can change into the “new normal” according to the technological developments without cultural constraints.

6.0 Concluding remarks

This study has developed the concept of horenso as Japan’s culturally driven communication system specific to the nation. The horenso system is considered part of the Japanese decision-making process, which belongs to the nexus of intrinsic connections between the personas. Horenso typically involves timely and frequent status updates on favorable and unfavorable matters, so team members and their

manager(s) are always on the same page. Horenso is likely to remain in the future with the local values of preference that support the system for mutual coexistence.

The local values of preference in this research can be seen as culture in a broad sense. Cultural research inevitably comes with the methodological issue of measuring a construct at the individual level. To mitigate the issue, this study has established the theoretical framework, in which horenso functions as tangible evidence. The framework supports the idea that cultural values at the individual level become observable when it is contextualized with evidence of a culturally driven practice obtained at a higher level. This approach can be used for future research into culture-related subjects.

The proposed framework suggests that it is effective to differentiate culturally driven and cultureless specificities for envisaging the future trajectory in the post-pandemic era. Culturally driven specificities, including regionally specific practices and values of preferences, are the constituents of the personas and are generally stable though not immutable. Cultureless specificities, including system changes ensuing technological developments, can relatively easily change without cultural constraints. The future is likely determined with intricate dialectic of the two contrasting realms. The current “new normal” may be, in a sense, a snapshot of Japan’s temporary transition to cope with the on-going pandemic. The future state may involve more face-to-face communication than present in the long run.

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