

Managing low-skilled migrant workers in Japan: an interdisciplinary review and
exploratory case studies

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1. Research background and research questions

There has been a growing interest in the issue of migrant workers in recent years in a range of academic disciplines and international contexts. Increasing number of blue-collar migrant workers are taking the jobs that local domestic workers are not willing to take, and becoming the critical labor force in many small and medium enterprises (SMEs). However, our knowledge on management of this unique and critical labor group is very limited. How in nature low-skilled migrant workers (LSMWs) are different from other often-discussed international human resources? What kind of factors do researchers and managers need to consider to effectively manage them?

The management issues of LSMWs have been neglected by both IHRM studies and migrant studies. The role of organizations and employers in a managed migration process and successful adaptation process is inadequately discussed. In the fields of HRM and IHRM, the most frequently discussed types of global workers are those “internationally mobile individuals who are highly educated and experienced (Guo & Al Ariss, 2015). LSMWs are underrepresented in management research. In this study, we would like to address this research gap by answering three questions: (1) what are the distinct features of LSMW compared to other international mobile workers? (2) to recruit and motivate LSMWs, what HRM challenges are employers facing in the selection process and reward systems; and (3) what kinds of selection and reward practices are adopted by SMEs to manage LSMWs.

2. Methodology

We have adopted qualitative research methods in this study for its advantages in answering questions about “what”, “how” and “why”. Our research design consists of an interdisciplinary review on existing literature on LSMW issues from the fields of migration studies and IHRM, and two exploratory case studies in Japanese SMEs.

In our interdisciplinary review, we will conduct a two-phase systematic review. The first phase contains review in existing migration studies on LSMW issues. In the second phase, we will scrutinize IHRM studies on LSMWs issues. Subsequently, we conducted in-depth interviews with two Japanese SMEs in Miyagi Prefecture who have employed migrant labors from developing Asian countries through Technical Intern Training Program (TITP). The participants included both employer (president, director and manager) and LSMWs (Technical interns). We have also visited and observed the working environment of company M and the dormitory of company S. Observational notes were taken to enable triangulation of interview data.

3. Findings

From our reviews on migrant studies and IHRM, we confirmed that managerial research on LSMWs has been given extremely scant attention. Furthermore, we found out the major characteristics of LSMWs that can distinguish them from other types of global workers.

The biggest difference between LSMWs and other skilled migrants are their less-advantaged education background and low career capitals, which consequently have led to low mobility and low agency. A “hard” HRM approach towards low-skilled migrant workers was found in empirical studies (C. Forde & Mackenzie, 2009). Work intensification, monotonous work, inferior working conditions, lack of face-to-face relationship and very limited training chances are associated with this questionable HRM approach (Edwards et al., 2009).

The findings from case studies have shown that Japanese SMEs have adopted special HRM practices in selection and rewarding process towards technical interns, which aim to facilitate cross-cultural communication and improve productivity. Company M represents a great number of SMEs who have adopted functional HRM perspectives towards technical interns (TIs). They have fulfilled their legal responsibility by obeying the labor law and keeping up with constantly changing regulations. While company S focused on the flourishing of their young TIs after the 3-year internship. What’s more, Company S has identified an expansion opportunity and innovatively linked their TIs with company’s internationalization expansion. In general, TIs in company S have shown less concern over their future career, reached higher Japanese ability, and integrated better with local community.

4. Conclusions

In this study, we address the research gap of current HRM challenges in managing LSMWs, with the special focus on the selection and rewarding processes. This study has largely three contributions. Firstly, a trial of interdisciplinary literature review to integrate the accumulated knowledge on the management issues of LSMW, which has been neglected in migration literatures and HRM literatures. Secondly, a call for inclusion of LSMW management issues within the IHRM dialogue. Third, two in-depth explorative case studies on Japanese SMEs who have hired LSMWs through TITP program, which have manifest the realities of LSMWs and their relationship with their employers. With the evidence from the interviews, we show the real HRM challenges faced by managers of SMEs and their special HRM approaches towards LSMWs. Our research also has important HRM implications for policy design, especially for Japanese policy makers and SME managers. However, our limitations do exist in both the review process and case study stages. The limited case amounts and the uniqueness of Japanese context will limit the generalizability of the findings. And full objectivity is hard to attain because of the subjective nature of the participants’ account of their behaviors. There are possibilities that participants all have refrained from revealing all their true thoughts because of the sensitivity of the issue in

current Japan. In addition, future studies need to be conducted to study other aspects of HRM practices, such as retention (training and development) and replacement, so that we can gain comprehensive understandings on the HRM practices towards LSMWs.

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