

Creativity of ordinary office workers in Japan

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While there have been some significant creative outputs from Japan, in such fields of science and technologies, or entertainment business like games or “manga,” many Japanese organizations also lament the lack of creativity of their employees. Recent survey research shows that Japanese organizations are more concerned about their clerical workers’ level of creativity than that of researchers, because they need better business skills to win the competition among companies which have same levels of service or product quality (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2012). Therefore, this study addresses the following two questions: “How Japanese ordinary office workers use their creativity on the job,” and “Does the way the creativity is expressed differ from that of Western cultures?”

Unlike researchers or designers, office worker’s job performance is usually evaluated by the level of efficiency and perfection toward the set goals, rather than the level of creativeness. I expect that office workers use their creativity more when they feel that creativity is needed to perform successfully. In order to test the prediction, this research uses a short description written by subjects about the episodes showing their creativity on the job. These descriptions are rated by third persons, in terms of goal difficulties, initiative goal setting by the subject, goal significance, the level of creativeness of the actions taken, the level of appropriateness of the actions taken, and final results. The data are analyzed to see what factors are related to ordinary office workers’ creativity within their work environment.

The second purpose of this research is to examine whether the feature of creativity of the East Asians suggested by Erez & Nouri (2010) hold valid with the current sample. According to their argument, the creativity of Japanese puts more weight on usefulness dimension than novelty dimension, due to Japanese cultural orientation of high in uncertainty-avoidance, high in power-distance, and high in collectivism. Therefore, I expected that the level of impacts of “novelty” is weaker than that of “usefulness” toward the successful outputs of office workers.

Result and discussion

The descriptions of work episode were originally collected in employment application processes for various job posts of various organizations in Japan from

130 subjects. The age of subjects ranges from 40 to 59 and 102 were male and 28 were female. They were required to describe an episode where their visionary ideas and strategic planning ability are shown. Their descriptions were evaluated by two business consultants. The interrater correlations were between .50 ~ .76. Using mean scores of the two evaluators, SEM analysis was conducted.

The figure shown below is the final model. The more the goals are initiatively set by the subjects and difficult to attain, the more creative actions as well as useful actions are taken. If Japanese office workers regard the goals as their own and think that the goal attainment is difficult, they become motivated to think and act outside of their usual pattern of actions. Additionally, correlation between personality scale scores of the subjects and ratings on creative action indicates that if a person is less socially introverted ($r = -.24$), has generally high achievement motivation ($r = .30$), energetic ($r = .23$), confident with self ($r = .28$), and low in sensitivity ($r = -.29$), he/she tends to take more creative actions. Regarding cultural feature of creativity, novelty has much less impact on the final performance, compared to appropriateness, as expected.

However, this result might come from the social norms and expectations of the work environment, and not necessarily from cultural value. Implications and limitations of this study will also be discussed.

