Engineers must have English skills to succeed

With the continuing trend of economic interdependence prevailing on a global scale, Japan is increasingly interwoven with the rest of the world on many fronts. The rapid production of goods for Japanese companies has been steadily growing during the past few decades while the number of non-Japanese nationals working in Japan has reached nearly half a million, or close to 1 percent of the total workforce, as of October 2008. Against this backdrop, it is becoming inevitable for Japanese researchers and engineers to communicate directly with non-Japanese people, not only in their local hires.

To some extent, Japanese companies have been stepping up the shift in production to foreign countries, and Japanese managers are facing the challenge of communicating with their foreign clients. Work closely with the sales departments while the design and development engineers who worked in manufacturing were sent abroad during the ‘90s, when companies started competing globally. This role drastically changed during the late 1990s when Japanese companies began to outsource their non-core jobs.

For example, Masaharu Hiraga, an ex-adviser to Sanden Corporation; Laurence Anthony, a professor at Waseda University; and Atsuko Yamazaki, a professor at the Shibaura Institute of Technology, among others, are engaged in English education for researchers and engineers.

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Moderator: Can you tell us how the economic changes have affected Japanese research and engineering? Hira: I was with Hitachi from 1965 to 2002. During this time, I witnessed many changes in the roles of people working in English. Work closely with the sales departments while the design and development engineers who worked in manufacturing were sent abroad during the ‘90s, when companies started competing globally. This role drastically changed during the late 1990s when Japanese companies began to outsource their non-core jobs.

Another factor needed for Japanese researchers and engineers to communicate effectively is the shift in production to foreign countries. While the design and development engineers who worked in manufacturing were sent abroad during the ‘90s, when companies started competing globally. This role drastically changed during the late 1990s when Japanese companies began to outsource their non-core jobs. This trend will only get stronger.

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Moderator: But why don’t I think it’s happening? what do corporations have for university education?

Anthony: I’ve talked with lots of students about their job interview process. Surprisingly, many said that corporations don’t seem to be interested in their English abilities.

Hirai: When corporations recruit students fresh out of college, they are looking for people who will become their future top managers, and the best predictor for this is the university’s name and reputation. Also, since the notion of lifetime employment still exists, corporations closely look at the people, not the skills they attain.

Hiraga: I find two strong blocks in corporate recruitment policies. One is that they don’t count on university education and thus, they don’t want smart, creative people. Corporations believe they can educate their employees from scratch, so they don’t want anyone with a predetermined set of skills or abilities.

Yamazaki: I feel this too, talking to recruiting managers in corporations. Sometimes, I speak candidly about the skills a particular student lacks, but they don’t seem to mind as long as he or she is a smart, likeable person with a good sense of humor.

Currently, I don’t see a positive spiral of needs. If corporations explicitly say, “These are the skills that we need for our employees,” and come up with some kind of measurement that can be put on students’ resumes, universities will follow this lead and build a curriculum around them. Once the curriculum is set, the needs for instructors to teach the curriculum will be determined and the positive spiral begins to function.

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