

# Working as an HR Specialist During the Pandemic



Author Kanako Fujimoto

By Kanako Fujimoto

## Pandemic in Japan

Many of us have found ourselves controlled by fear and uncertainties these past two years. It has been a challenge for all of us universally. World GDP slowed down 3.7% in the year 2020 due to the spread of Covid-19. According to Nikkei Inc., over 1,000 companies in various industries have closed down. Although Japan's infection rates are gradually decreasing, citizens are still unsure about going back to our normal life. The pandemic has continuously challenged us to step outside the box to make important decisions.

This article will look at how these new risks affected the status quo within Japanese companies. I will also discuss the support that human resources (HR) must provide and how alignment of work and creative living can enhance one's life, based on my personal experience as an HR specialist during the pandemic.

## Work Style & HR Role Transformation

Due to the sudden imposition of quarantines, companies had to make a drastic transition to a more flexible working style. In a chemical manufacturing company, the research and development institute and plants had a rough time adjusting due to safety regulations, but also had to continue their production. Some institutes closed down 100% while others adjusted attendance rates according to the research stage of the projects in each department. In handling new priorities, managers were required to sort out which ideas and projects to proceed with and which to reject, more frequently using limited amounts and resources of people, time and money.

A labor union survey showed positive results regarding improvement in people's physical health, increases in time for self-improvement and a higher overall level of well-being due to the loosening of rules and a more flexible working style. During our first major quarantine phase, I believe many of us spent a lot of time alone. Some employees' mental health declined due to everyday uncertainties, and the lack of interactions both within and outside of their company. It was especially for those who enjoy human interaction and were not able to ask simple questions to their department members. On the bright side, though, we were able to experience more of what we truly enjoy doing and to think about our ideal and sustainable working environment. I am sure we all figured out our own support system to maintain our physical and mental

health. Developing the skill sets to support an employee's physical and mental health has become one of HR's top priorities due to the pandemic.

Survey data also showed that due to work-style transformation and suspension of business trips, productivity speed most definitely decreased. Japan's persistently low productivity is still a continuing problem. After the big spread of online communication tools, employees tried to fill in the communication gap through online meetings, attempting to reboot productivity. But people still struggled with a lack of communication, with fewer opportunities to share ideas and have human interaction, leaving them feeling somewhat isolated.

In traditional Japanese companies, communication is often maintained through after-work drinking parties (*nomikai*). This certainly affected my company, but having the chance to reconsider our methods of communication enabled us to look back at what is truly important in the trust-building process. My biggest impression of the changes in human behavior was that employees became more accepting and respectful of an individual's situation by providing the necessary support for them. Currently we are trying to maintain communication within working hours, respecting an individual's personal time. This could be the base mentality we need in the future to accelerate diversity and inclusion.

Given that the various "norms" among individuals are different, I felt that setting employment rules and standards for employees was very difficult during the first quarantine phase. I remember handling them delicately, being sure to create as many options as possible to meet employees' needs. The gradual shift to a flexible working style allowed many of us to reconsider our work-life balance (what is valuable enough to invest time in) and gave us a greater awareness of productivity. On this topic of productivity, many questions arose in my mind: Can we shorten the manager approval process in such an ameba-like organization? Should we consider developing a digital system to speed up the material sharing process for conferences? Should we reconsider our work procedures and priorities?

As I have mentioned above, HR responsibility has broadened to include work-style reform, health management, system development and retaining employee engagement levels. Each task has become more complex, needing HR to become extra creative rather than simply doing what we are told to do. Moreover, we are required to provide high-level emotional support and to become more precise in our communications than ever before. The "new norms" have brought

about various challenges, but have also given us the opportunity to reconsider our needs and wants. A skill set to assess situations from differing perspectives to arrive at appropriate solutions is the key to becoming a professional HR specialist.

## Mindset Shift

Having been raised in the United States, working in a traditional Japanese company has been an interesting adventure for me. I found that with the *shakaijin* (company employee) mentality, bigger challenges are approved more easily by building up examples of small successes. If proven safe with minimum risk, the chances are you will get your ideas and projects approved. But how many endless “what ifs” should we list up? How governments and companies handled the pandemic revealed how our actions and decisions are strongly tied to our cultural background. An article published by Nippon.com claimed that Japanese people interoperating on “risks” would lead to a negative outcome, and as a result it is only natural that people in Japan do their best to avoid risks. The pandemic in a way forced Japanese people to take risks counter to the status quo, and allowed us to try out new projects and events within our own roles. Even though companies still struggle to balance out risks, the pandemic has certainly changed both HR and employees’ mentality more than ever.

For better or worse, I also believe this pandemic has pushed companies to change how they perceive uncertain situations. We have seen how situations are handled differently in other countries, once again often a reflection of personal beliefs and cultural backgrounds, and have learned to accept different actions and propose diverse solutions. Corporate globalization can only be achieved by team effort. Just as Japanese citizens and government worked together to get through the pandemic, so globalization has forced us to change our mindset and to be more accepting of each other. If we can all imagine our glass is half empty and the other half can be filled by learning from people around us, wouldn’t our life be more fruitful? I truly feel this is the mindset we all should work on, building together to aim to become more open-minded for our company to succeed in expanding its global business in the future.

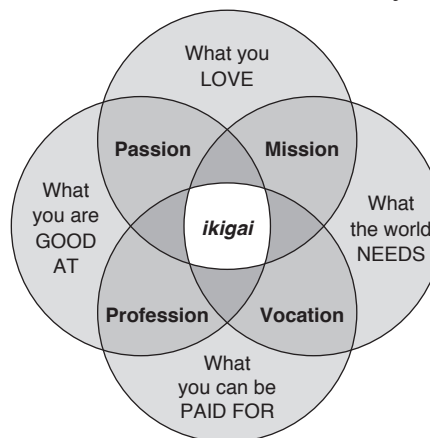
## Alignment of Purpose & Creative Living

One of HR’s biggest roles is to have occasional career development interviews with employees. This pandemic has given an opportunity for all of us to look back on our careers and to reconfirm our beliefs in the value of our careers and lives. It is almost like an onion skin being peeled off, exposing our most natural and authentic self.

A trusted mentor of mine once told me: “Create your own paradise. Your actions and decisions must align with your own values both career-wise and life-wise.” This was the most powerful advice I have been given. I have seen many people look for happiness externally, especially during this pandemic, but no work tasks, culture or company is perfectly made just for you. Friends and employees have come to me for help, saying “I do not know what is bothering me exactly, but I feel extremely stuck.” Some people felt as if they were losing their sense of self, reconsidering what they want to do for a living, and were confused about their purpose in life.

CHART

Image: Wikipedia



On the other hand, we can take this as a signal to reevaluate what feels right, with what is aligned with our values, and what is not. I have noticed many people already unconsciously know what they want, but have not yet have been able to implement or connect their actions to their daily work tasks. As the “*ikigai*” (roughly, “reason for being”) Chart shows, career falls between profession and vocation. For those who are struggling with the “purpose of life” due to the effects of prolonged quarantine and massive lifestyle transformation, listing points in each criteria may help them figure out what to do on a daily basis to make their career and life purpose clearer.

Once I got the hang of creative living myself, it brought me more joy in work, and I found meaning in small daily tasks and regained my sense of self. This mentality is the same in our private life. I have realized that no education teaches us “alignment of life” or “how to build or create our own career”. I believe this will be one important role that HR will be handling in the future. From my own personal experience during the pandemic, I am now able to give better guidance to those who are struggling with their career development.

I feel happy when I am able to contribute to make an employee’s work environment and career better. Career plays a huge part in our life and I believe that working is one way to make our life more joyful. In that sense, there is no point in investing in something that does not make our life fruitful. I wish to become a person who has the ability to create jobs around an individual’s talents to produce the best outcome for the employee and the company.

In this article, I have mentioned how new risks were taken counter to the status quo in Japanese companies, and how alignment of work and creative living can enhance a person’s life based on my own experiences working as a HR specialist during the pandemic. I hope to continue to contribute to enhancing *ikigai* for all people who come to me, leaving them just a little more joyful than I found them to be. I would like to continue building skill sets to support employees in creating their ideal career and guide them toward a better and more fruitful life.

JS

Kanako Fujimoto is an experienced HR specialist in a chemical manufacturing company. She focuses mainly on recruiting, promoting diversity and business globalization through the development of human resources.