



Culture Shock and Cultural Adaptation in Professional Internships in Japan: A Case Study of Thai Interns at Fujiya Hotel, Hakone

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Abstract

International internships provide students with invaluable professional and cultural exposure; however, they also pose substantial adaptation challenges. This study examines the culture shock that Thai students from the College of Liberal Arts at Rangsit University encountered during their professional internship at Fujiya Hotel in Hakone, Japan. This study explores the language barriers, workplace hierarchy, and cultural expectations faced by the interns, as well as the strategies they employed to adapt, using in-depth interviews and survey data. The results reveal that the students' experiences were significantly influenced by factors such as punctuality, politeness, cooperation, and structured communication. Although initial adaptation challenges were considerable, guidance from Japanese colleagues, immersive learning, and observation of workplace norms resulted in substantial personal and professional development. Ultimately, the experience bolstered their confidence, communication skills, and cultural adaptability, illustrating the significance of structured internship programs in preparing students for careers in globally competitive fields.

Keywords: *Japanese Work Culture, Internship Students, Adaptation, Workplace Integration, Thai Interns, Cross-Cultural Learning*

1. Introduction

Cross-cultural competence is a critical skill for individuals who aspire to work in international environments, as the workforce has been substantially altered by globalization. With the growing mobility of education and employment, students are being encouraged to participate in global experiences that enhance their professional adaptability and cultural awareness. International apprenticeship programs are one of the most effective methods for exposing students to a variety of work environments, cultural norms, and professional expectations. Interns acquire industry-specific skills and cultivate interpersonal and cross-cultural communication competencies that are highly regarded in the contemporary interconnected world by fully integrating into a foreign work culture.

In industries such as hospitality, technology, and business, Japan provides distinctive opportunities for international trainees, as one of the world's leading economies. Nevertheless, the adjustment to the Japanese work environment can be challenging due to its unique organizational culture. Japanese organizations prioritize hierarchy, discipline, and meticulous attention to detail, which can be overwhelming for foreign trainees who are not familiar with these standards (Elifondri & Amril, 2021). Furthermore, the high-context nature of Japanese interactions and their indirect communication style can present additional obstacles, necessitating trainees to interpret implicit communication indicators and workplace etiquette (Vo, 2024).

Cultural adaptation is a multifaceted process that requires both behavioral and psychological modifications. Individuals typically undergo four stages during the adaptation to a new culture, as per Oberg's (1960) model of culture shock: the honeymoon stage, the crisis stage, the recuperation stage, and the adjustment stage. Interns who effectively navigate these phases frequently cultivate a greater appreciation for cultural diversity, self-confidence, and resilience. In contrast, individuals who encounter difficulties with adaptation may encounter tension, frustration, and diminished productivity. In order to enhance international internship programs and ensure more effective support systems for students who



participate in cross-cultural experiences, it is imperative to comprehend these dynamics (Ang, Ng, & Rockstuhl, 2019).

The cultural adaptation of Thai trainees in Japan is a compelling case study. Japan was chosen as the research site due to its distinctly hierarchical work environment, collectivist communication styles, and strong emphasis on punctuality and service etiquette—elements that may differ from the cultural expectations of Thai students. These cultural features are particularly emphasized in service industries such as hospitality, where Thai students commonly undertake internships.

Thailand and Japan share certain cultural similarities, including respect for hierarchy and collectivism. However, they also exhibit notable differences in professional expectations, work ethics, and communication methods. While Thai workplaces may prioritize personal relationships and flexibility, Japanese organizations prioritize efficiency, precision, and strict adherence to protocols. Thai interns may initially experience culture shock due to these distinctions, prompting the need for adaptive strategies to facilitate their successful integration into their new professional environment (Brancu, Munteanu, & Golet, 2016).

The nature of the service sector presents additional challenges for interns employed in the Japanese hospitality industry, such as at Fujiya Hotel in Hakone. The Japanese concept of *omotenashi*, or altruistic hospitality, necessitates a high level of professionalism, attentiveness, and customer service. This demands that foreign trainees not only comprehend cultural expectations regarding guest interactions, collaboration, and service quality but also grasp workplace decorum. Their personal and professional development necessitates forbearance, keen observation, and continuous learning to adjust to these standards.

This investigation examines the cultural adaptation process, challenges encountered, and strategies implemented by Thai students who are interning at Fujiya Hotel to assimilate into the workplace. This research offers an in-depth comprehension of the factors that influence adaptation and the way interns navigate cultural differences by examining both qualitative interviews and quantitative survey responses. Its objective is to illuminate the most effective methods for international internship programs, with a particular emphasis on the significance of intercultural training, support systems, and preparation.

Additionally, this research contributes to the expanding corpus of literature on cross-cultural fellowships by emphasizing the insights gained from practical experiences. Prior research has investigated the adaptation of international students to foreign academic environments; however, there is a scarcity of research that investigates the impact of workplace integration on professional development and cultural adaptation. This study addresses this gap and offers actionable insights for educational institutions, internship coordinators, and host organizations by concentrating on the intersection of professional development, workplace communication, and culture shock.

Ultimately, the results of this research will be used to inform future initiatives aimed at enhancing the quality of international internships. Universities can better prepare students for their professional journeys abroad, sponsor organizations can refine their induction processes, and universities can develop more effective pre-departure training programs by comprehending the challenges encountered by Thai trainees in Japan. Fostering cross-cultural competence will continue to be a critical component of preparing students for the global workforce as international internships gain increasing prominence.

2. Purposes

This study aims to investigate the primary cultural obstacles encountered by Thai apprentices in a Japanese work environment. It also seeks to evaluate the strategies that trainees use to adjust to the Japanese work environment. Additionally, it assesses the efficacy of cultural preparedness and language proficiency in alleviating culture shock. The research further explores the ways in which the internship experience enhances the personal and professional growth of apprentices. The objective of this study is to offer practical insights for prospective trainees, educational institutions, and host organizations to enhance the support of cross-cultural internship experiences by addressing these objectives with a particular focus on



how Thai students navigate cultural expectations in Japanese workplace settings, such as hospitality and service industries.

3. Materials and Methods

The adaptation experiences of Thai trainees are analyzed using a mixed-methods approach, which incorporates both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Given the exploratory nature of the study, qualitative methods such as open-ended interviews and reflective journals were employed to provide detailed, contextualized insights into student adaptation experiences. Although quantitative survey data were collected, the study prioritized depth over generalizability.

The study participants consisted of four male apprentices, aged 22-25, who had completed six-month residencies at Fujiya Hotel in Hakone, Japan. Both participants self-assessed their proficiency level as "good" and had studied Japanese for 5-10 years. They also maintained GPAs between 3.00 and 4.00. Quantitative data regarding cultural adaptability, confidence in communication, and perceived levels of culture shock were obtained through the administration of a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire used in this study was developed and validated by Linn Van Dyne, Soon Ang, and Christine Koh (Van Dyne, Ang, & Koh, 2015). It assesses cultural intelligence (CQ) across four key dimensions: Metacognitive CQ, Cognitive CQ, Motivational CQ, and Behavioral CQ. These categories measure an individual's awareness of cultural knowledge, familiarity with foreign cultures, motivation to engage in cross-cultural experiences, and ability to adjust behaviors accordingly. The survey also included open-ended questions to capture firsthand experiences of culture shock, challenges faced during the internship, and recommendations for future interns. The survey comprised Likert-scale questions that evaluated the adaptability of participants in the areas of social interactions, non-verbal communication, and workplace behavior. A series of semi-structured interviews was conducted to investigate the personal experiences, adaptation challenges, and key insights of the interns. Transcription and thematic analysis of interviews were conducted to identify trends in professional development, cultural integration, and adaptation strategies.

4. Findings and Discussions

These findings were further substantiated by survey data, which illustrated a high degree of adaptability among the interns. Respondents reported that they initially faced challenges in adjusting to Japanese social and professional expectations but became progressively more comfortable as they gained exposure and practical experience. Over time, they expressed greater ease in navigating workplace interactions, communicating with colleagues and customers, and understanding non-verbal cultural cues.

Survey results indicated that confidence levels in cross-cultural communication were consistently high, with responses averaging between 4.0 to 5.0 across multiple dimensions. These included professional decorum, where interns demonstrated an improved understanding of Japanese workplace etiquette, speech modulation, which involved adjusting their tone, speed, and formality to suit different social situations, and adapting facial expressions, ensuring that their non-verbal communication conformed to Japanese cultural expectations.

The high adaptability scores corroborate previous research on cultural intelligence and professional development in international internship programs. Ang, Ng, and Rockstuhl (2019) emphasize that individuals immersed in structured internship environments experience accelerated cultural learning and skill acquisition, enabling them to adapt more efficiently. This supports the notion that direct engagement with a foreign work culture fosters not only linguistic and technical skills but also socio-emotional competencies, essential for successful cross-cultural professional interactions (Ang, Ng, & Rockstuhl, 2019).

The findings from this study are categorized into key themes that emerged from the interviews and survey responses. These themes offer valuable insights into the experiences of the four Thai interns who participated in the study.



4.1 Language Barriers and Communication Adaptation

One of the most frequently reported challenges was language barriers, particularly in professional interactions and everyday communication. Interns highlighted the difficulty of using formal Japanese and adjusting to Japan's indirect communication style.

"The difference in language levels made communication challenging." (Student A)

"Administrative procedures were complicated and took longer than expected." (Student B)

To overcome these challenges, the interns developed strategies such as actively listening, observing their colleagues, and gradually improving their usage. Over time, they became more comfortable communicating in Japanese, particularly in customer service interactions.

4.2 Workplace Hierarchy and Professional Etiquette

Japanese corporate structures place a strong emphasis on seniority, discipline, and meticulous organization, which initially made it difficult for interns to engage openly with their supervisors.

"Understanding my responsibilities and organizing tasks efficiently was essential. Adjusting to a new work culture took time, but I learned that mistakes in Japan are handled differently than in Thailand. Instead of direct criticism, feedback is given collectively, making it important to be proactive in improving my work." (Student C)

Despite these initial struggles, the interns gradually learned to navigate the hierarchical structure by observing workplace norms and following the guidance of their senior colleagues. They reported that the mentorship from Japanese coworkers played a key role in their adaptation.

4.3 Cultural Differences in Daily Life

Beyond workplace adaptation, daily life in Japan also required significant adjustments. Interns had to adapt to new routines, manage their own finances, and navigate Japan's structured society.

"Garbage separation rules were different from what I had researched before arriving. The system varies by location, which made it difficult to adjust at first." (Student A)

"Living in Japan required careful financial management and self-sufficiency. I also had to adapt to different food options and transportation methods, which was a learning experience." (Student B)

Interns also reported encountering minor challenges related to transportation, grocery shopping, and adjusting to Japan's fast-paced urban life. However, they saw these experiences as valuable lessons in independence and adaptability.

4.4 Professional Growth and Learning

An important part of the interns' experiences was learning about Japanese hospitality culture, which emphasizes selfless customer service and anticipating guests' needs.

"At first, I was surprised by how dedicated Japanese employees were to their work. Every task was planned thoroughly, with pre-shift meetings to prevent mistakes and ensure smooth handovers. This level of professionalism was impressive." (Student C)



This focus on high-quality service, efficiency, and professionalism significantly contributed to the interns' personal and professional growth.

4.5 Coping Strategies and Personal Development

Despite the initial culture shock, all four interns reported notable personal growth by the end of the internship. They developed resilience, confidence, and the ability to adapt to new environments.

"Strengthening my language skills before arriving would have helped a lot." (Student A)

"Mental and physical preparedness is essential when adapting to a new culture." (Student B)

By engaging in social activities, learning from mentors, and embracing Japanese culture, the interns successfully navigated their cultural adaptation process.

The findings of this study indicate that the cultural disparities encountered by Thai interns at Fujiya Hotel required substantial adaptation. Initially, the trainees encountered communication difficulties, particularly in comprehending the Japanese inclination toward indirect speech and non-verbal cues. In contrast to Thailand, where direct feedback is prevalent, Japanese supervisors generally provided guidance through discreet suggestions rather than explicit instructions. This necessitated that the trainees cultivate enhanced interpretive and observational abilities to comprehend workplace expectations (Elifondri & Amril, 2021).

The trainees' assimilation was significantly influenced by the hierarchy of the workplace, in addition to communication differences. Initially, the trainees found it challenging to engage in open discussions with senior colleagues due to the emphasis on seniority and respect for authority in Japanese corporate structures. Nevertheless, the trainees gradually adjusted by exhibiting professionalism and deference, which enabled them to establish more effective working relationships and earn trust (Michailova & Ott, 2017). The interns developed the ability to effectively navigate workplace dynamics and communicate in a way that aligned with Japanese business etiquette due to their recurrent exposure to these hierarchical structures (Vo, 2024).

The apprentices' cultural learning was also influenced by their adjustments in everyday life, extending beyond the confines of the workplace. One critical aspect of adaptation was the adjustment to Japan's structured approach to daily life, which encompassed the practice of punctuality and meticulous organization. The trainees observed that their success in the program was contingent upon their adherence to rigorous schedules and their high level of personal responsibility. In the same vein, they had to adapt to the cultural norms that govern formal greetings and civility, which are indispensable in Japanese professional environments (Brancu, Munteanu, & Golet, 2016).

Another significant aspect of the interns' adaptation process involved understanding Japan's customer service philosophy, particularly the concept of *omotenashi*. The interns were required to develop a strong sense of responsiveness and meticulous attention to detail, as the core principle centered on selfless hospitality and anticipating the needs of visitors. This exposure not only sharpened their service skills but also cultivated a more profound comprehension of Japanese work ethics and professionalism (Vo, 2024).

In general, the Thai interns' experience at Fujiya Hotel proved to be transformative and enriching. They reported substantial enhancements in their cross-cultural communication skills, adaptability, and confidence, despite initial obstacles. The value of international internships in improving global career readiness and cultural intelligence is demonstrated by their capacity to adapt to a highly structured and hierarchical work environment. The results underscore the significance of mentorship programs, structured cultural preparation, and hands-on learning experiences in the facilitation of successful international internships.



5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This investigation emphasizes the vital role of adaptability and structured cultural orientation in ensuring the success of international internship programs. The importance of proactive learning, resilience, and cultural competence in both personal and professional growth is underscored by the obstacles encountered by Thai interns at the Fujiya Hotel. The results suggest that structured mentorship, keen observation, and active social integration are essential for facilitating cultural transitions. Interns who intentionally pursue cultural learning opportunities tend to navigate workplace obstacles and thrive in cross-cultural settings.

In order to encompass a more comprehensive array of internship experiences, future research should consider involving a larger and more diverse participant pool. Deeper insights into cultural adaptation unfolding across work environments could be achieved by broadening the scope of the study to include interns from a variety of academic disciplines and professional domains. Furthermore, longitudinal studies monitoring trainees' cultural adaptation beyond the internship period would shed light on the enduring impact of international work experiences on career trajectories (Michailova & Ott, 2017).

Further research should examine the effects of pre-departure training programs, including mentorship initiatives, cultural immersion seminars, and language courses, on alleviating culture shock and enhancing internship outcomes. Investigating the impact of varying levels of language proficiency and prior exposure to Japanese culture on adaptation could provide universities and host organizations with practical strategies for designing more impactful preparatory programs (Ang, Ng, & Rockstuhl, 2019).

Lastly, future research could investigate the perspectives of Japanese counterparts and sponsor organizations regarding the integration of foreign trainees. Developing more inclusive workplace practices that benefit both local employees and international interns could be facilitated by an understanding of how Japanese supervisors and colleagues perceive and support international interns (Vo, 2024). By addressing these perspectives, future research can further improve the efficacy of international internship programs and better prepare students for success in global professional environments.

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7. References

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