



Big in Japan? Recruitment and Training Strategies of German Companies in Japan

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Abstract

The article examines the recruitment and training strategies of German multinational companies in Japan, focusing on the intermediate skill level. It also analyses which factors in the Japanese environment influence these strategies. The EPRG typology and the concept of “institutional logic” serve as the theoretical basis. Twenty-five experts from the field of human resource management (HRM) in ten German companies were surveyed, along with four external experts. The key findings show that German companies in Japan are increasingly hiring older applicants with professional experience. While onboarding is common for all new employees, the dominant form of training for the small number of career entrants is on-the-job training. Moreover, these companies adopt few if any elements of German training modes. These strategies may be understood in terms of institutional logic. The findings are of practical relevance to companies but also offer new insight into theoretical perspectives. The independent strategy pursued by German companies in Japan in the context of recruitment cannot be classified under the EPRG approach: although they do not act like big Japanese companies when recruiting, neither do they implement the strategy of their home country or a global or regional strategy. Their strategy can therefore be termed “independent localisation”, thus expanding the existing EPRG approach.

Keywords Recruitment · Training · Strategy · Japan · German MNC

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Introduction

German multinational companies (MNCs) operate worldwide and maintain a large number of foreign locations (Destatis, 2025). In order to produce and distribute successfully in these foreign markets, they need appropriate management strategies, particularly in the crucially important area of human resource management (HRM) (Aycan, 2005; Volberda et al., 2012). This is particularly true when the host country differs greatly from Germany in socio-cultural terms. Against this backdrop, Japan merits academic consideration as country for study. As a highly industrialised country, Japan has been an important trading partner for German companies for decades but also has a recruitment system and labour market that differ greatly from the German context (Hennings et al., 2025). Germany and Japan also have fundamentally different education and training systems (Pilz 2016a). In this respect, this study of the recruitment and training strategies of German MNCs in Japan follows a “most different” design approach (Anckar, 2008). The focus is on employees at the intermediate skill level (Ryan, 2001): for management positions, German MNCs often adopt international recruitment and training modes that are not relevant to this study.

The majority of large companies in Germany cover their long-term demand for skilled workers by participating in the German dual training system. In broad terms, this system standardises training in more than 300 different occupations in line with state-prescribed training regulations. Training lasts between two years and three and a half years. It is completed both at the workplace (with a high proportion of practical work) and at a state vocational school (with a high proportion of theory). The curricula and teaching materials in vocational schools are largely standardised; companies draw up training plans that must be based on the specifications of general training regulations. In addition, trainers must themselves be trained and certified. The majority of apprentices enter the system directly from school. Training is supervised by the relevant chambers of industry and commerce, which are also responsible for final examinations and standardised certification throughout Germany (Fuerstenau et al., 2014; Le Mouillour & Schneider, 2015).

In this context, it is also of interest to explore whether the dual training system that forms such an integral part of the German system also operates in German subsidiaries abroad. The German Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Japan has recently been actively promoting adoption of the German dual training system in German automotive companies operating in Japan and has already started to implement it (AHK, 2025).

The following specific research questions arise:

- What recruitment strategies do German MNCs pursue in Japan?
- What training strategies do German MNCs pursue in Japan?
- Which Japanese factors in the areas of the education system, labour market and society influence these strategies?

The first two questions are of a more exploratory nature and form the basis for a theory-based typology of the strategies. The results section presents the findings in

response to the third question. These are then interpreted in the discussion section using an institutional approach. The theoretical approaches are explained below.

State of Research and Theoretical Basis

In addition to extensive research on general HR strategies of MNCs abroad (e.g. Bartram et al. 2020) and a study comparing recruitment and training practices at the intermediate skill level in different countries (Zenner-Höffkes et al., 2021), research has also investigated the specific strategy of German MNCs abroad. Jürgens and Krzywdzinski (2014) analysed the training of skilled workers in China by German, Japanese and local car manufacturers; Gessler (2017) investigated the training practices of Daimler Benz in the USA; and Aring (2014) analysed the training provided by BMW, Siemens and Volkswagen in the USA. However, there are only a few studies that look at the training behaviour of German multinational companies on a cross-national basis. One example is Pilz & Li (2014), who included German companies in China and India in their sample in addition to German companies in the USA. The authors argue that the local context is of central importance to the implementation of training concepts and show that in China, for example, cooperation with vocational schools or the Chamber of Industry and Commerce is one route to achieving this. By contrast, the focus in India is primarily on internal training concepts. However, the authors do not go into detail about the different local influences. Further studies include those by Pilz & Wiemann (2021), Vogelsang and Pilz (2021), and Wiemann and Fuchs (2018), which examine recruitment, initial training and continuing education in German companies in China, India and Mexico. Here, too, country-specific contextual conditions are found to have a dominant influence on the strategy of German companies.

An earlier study by Chiavacci (2004) focused on the recruitment and employment strategies of Swiss companies in Japan. This study found that, in contrast to Japanese companies, Swiss companies suffered from a poor image in terms of social recognition, which was seen as a disadvantage in the context of recruitment. However, this study did not explicitly focus on employees at the intermediate skill level and largely excluded training activities.

To our knowledge, only one – somewhat older – article (Pilz 2016b) deals specifically with the recruitment and training strategies of German companies in Japan at the intermediate skill level, and it considers only five German companies. This study shows that German companies either recruit university graduates and train them internally or hire experienced personnel and provide further training as needed. No company offers training based on German standards in a dual training mode.

The research focus on the recruitment and training activities of German companies in Japan is therefore based on a set of different theoretical approaches (the EPRG typology), further operationalised by the three-level conceptualisation for categorisation and the “institutional logic” approach.

The EPRG typology was suggested by Perlmutter and Heenan (1974; see also Heenan & Perlmutter, 1979). In the EPRG typology, the authors differentiate between “ethnocentric”, “polycentric”, “regiocentric” and “geocentric” as the basic attitude

adopted by companies. The typology is still widely in use (Dowling et al., 2013; Festing et al., 2007) and has been adapted to VET (vocational education and training) research (see for example Pilz 2016b). When a company transfers its concepts and cultural norms from the parent company to a subsidiary abroad, its basic strategy can be said to be an “ethnocentric” one in which employees are recruited and trained primarily in the country of origin. A company with a “polycentric” strategy, on the other hand, assumes that the cultural and institutional features in the host country (i.e. the country where the foreign subsidiary is located) diverge so markedly from those in the country of origin that it is advantageous to adapt its corporate activities as closely as possible to the local environment and to recruit and train its staff in line with the standards applying in the host country. In a company with a “regiocentric” strategy, by contrast, foreign subsidiaries operate within a relatively homogenous geographical region and have a mutual influence on each other. This means that concepts developed in the parent company can be adapted locally to the institutional features of that region. A company with a “geocentric” strategy, finally, is described as a globally oriented company whose objective is to operate a standard approach across both the parent company and its foreign operations. The main characteristic of the HRM policy underpinning such a strategy is that employees are appointed to key positions independently of their country of origin.

Central to these theoretical considerations is the assumption that even multinational companies are strongly rooted in their country of origin in many respects. The typology also assumes that the country of origin exerts a strong influence on recruitment and training decisions, particularly in the development of behaviours and structures. The extent to which the parent company influences the subsidiary varies according to institutional and cultural differences between the company’s country of origin and the host country (Ferner, 1997; Ferner et al., 2001; Noorderhaven & Harzing, 2003; Pudelko & Harzing, 2007; Pudelko & Tenzer, 2024).

Ferner et al., (2001, p. 123) show in this context that the degree to which German companies transfer typical German HRM methods abroad depends on the institutional conditions prevailing in the host country. If cultural and institutional conditions in the host country limit the transfer of HRM methods from the parent company and the foreign subsidiary consequently adopts the practices and methods of the host country, the literature refers to this as a “host country effect” or a “localisation effect” (Ferner, 1997).

The field of research discussed here is heavily dominated by HRM literature; VET research in this context has so far not taken an independent approach focused primarily on MNCs. This makes the HRM typology outlined here particularly suitable for analysing and systematising the recruitment strategies and training activities of German companies in Japan because of its international focus and broad conceptualisation. However, the findings generated in this study will be interpreted using theoretical approaches already applied in VET research (see below).

In order to comprehensively capture the complexity of the topic in the context of the EPRG typology, the categorisation criteria have been operationalised by adopting an approach proposed by Pilz & Wiemann (2021). This approach addresses three different levels and is based on relevant theoretical concepts connected to the discourse in VET (see Table 1).

Table 1 Multi-Level Concept with Research Categories (adapted by Authors, 2020)

Level	Research category
Macro-level Institutional structures and economic, social and political framework	• Responsibility for training • Characteristics of local labour market • Connections with local (vocational) training system • Reputation of VET (socioculturally-determined)
Meso-level Organisational and regulatory design of VET	• Decision making and strategy development in multinational companies • Production-oriented training needs • Recruitment • Financing • Standardisation of training by curricula • Examinations/certification • Initial and continuing training staff
Micro-level Specific teaching/learning activities	• Training objectives • Content • Methodological/pedagogical implementation • Materials • Learning environment

The socio-cultural significance and regulation of the working environment as a framework for work organisation at company level (Wolf, 2017) and the management of an MNC (Dowling et al., 2013) are captured at the macro-level and addressed in the guide through aspects of “institutional structures and economic, social and political framework conditions”. The embedding of recruitment and training in contextual factors and their influence are taken into account at the meso-level (Pilz 2016a) and mapped using aspects such as “recruitment needs”, “organisational design of training”, “training and development personnel” and “examinations/certification”. Following Billett (2001), the micro-level comprises “specific teaching/learning activities” including “learning content”. In the context of recruitment, the exact recruitment processes and actors involved are also surveyed.

It is meaningful to interpret the motives behind companies’ actions (research question 3) from a theoretical perspective using approaches to institutional research that are already well established in international discourse (Cantwell et al., 2010; Caprar et al., 2022; Ferner et al., 2005), in particular, the “institutional logic” approach (Zoellner, 2020), which explicitly reveals and explains the actors’ motives for social action (Conrad & Meyer-Ohle, 2023; Hennings et al., 2025). This approach has been comprehensively adapted for the VET context, particularly by Zoellner (2020). As Zoellner explains, “Institutional logics represent frames of reference that condition actors’ choices for sense-making, the vocabulary they use to motivate action and their sense of self and identity” (2020, 424). Zoellner continues (2020, 425): “Institutional logics are intended to offer a viable alternative to rational choice approaches’ (i.e. marketisation) in understanding human behaviour. Instead of viewing society through a singular economic lens and education in terms of human capital theory, they believe that ‘society is constituted through multiple institutional logics’.”

These logics can also explain the interactions between German companies and the contextual conditions of the Japanese environment.

Methods

In order to gain as deep and differentiated an understanding as possible of the nature of the strategy and its logic, a qualitative method was chosen. Interviews were conducted with HRM and training experts at German companies in Japan. An interview guide already successfully employed to investigate recruitment and training in German companies in other countries and based on the same theoretical background was used but adapted to Japanese conditions (Pilz & Wiemann, 2021).

The selection of companies, all operating in the Greater Tokyo area, was based on the following criteria: the companies had more than 100 employees on site, operated production and distribution facilities, and had been active in the area for a long time. This ensured that the companies employed a large number of employees at the relevant intermediate skill level.

Field access and selection were supported by the German Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Japan (AHK Japan). A total of ten companies (25 participating experts, more than 80% of whom were of Japanese origin, with the remainder being German nationals) were surveyed between March and May 2025; interviews for eight of these companies were conducted on site in the Japanese HR departments and the remaining two online. The companies operate in the automotive production and supply, chemical, pharmaceutical, mechanical engineering, and steel industries, and each employs between 100 and 4,000 persons in Japan.

In addition, to better classify the findings, four interviews were conducted with relevant experts at the German Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Japan (AHK), two German-Japanese business development agencies, and a private Japanese recruitment company.

All interviewees participated voluntarily and were informed of their right to anonymity regarding data use and storage in accordance with relevant legislation. Consent was obtained via email or verbally before the interview began.

The interviews, conducted in German or English, lasted between 45 min and 1.5 h and were mostly recorded electronically and transcribed in full. The material was evaluated using the three levels specified above and the guiding categories they include. Further specific analysis was carried out inductively and was based on interpretative methods (Bohnsack et al. 2010). This evaluation method provides a comprehensive perspective on a complex field and can, for example, also capture and shed light on unexpected circumstances in an intercultural context. Responses are quoted verbatim and any errors reflect non-native use of English. German original quotations listed below have been translated into English by the author.

Findings

First of all, it should be noted that the interviews revealed no major differences between the industries in which the companies operated as far as recruitment and training strategies were concerned. Our data also show no significant difference in terms of strategy resulting from differences in company (U) size or the length of time the subsidiary had been established in Japan. Analysis of statements made by inter-

viewees revealed that the interviewees' arguments rarely referred to these potential influencing factors. Rather, recurring findings emerged independently of the different company specifics. The external perspective provided by the four additional interviews with external stakeholders (A) corroborated these findings.

Analysis is based deductively on the theoretical foundation of the macro-, meso- and micro-levels (see above) and is supplemented by additional aspects derived inductively from the material. Specifically, there is a distinction between recruitment on the one hand and training on the other hand. The influencing factors (research question 3) found in the interviews are embedded in the analysis.

It should be noted here that the term "German companies" refers only to those included in our sample. Given the small sample size, it is not possible to make an uncritical generalisation of all German companies operating in Japan. However, certain findings may be supported by the results of other studies.

Recruitment

German companies in Japan generally perceive two overarching structural conditions as shaping all recruitment activity. First, the transition from the education system to the employment system — as indeed the labour market itself — is organised in a highly country-specific manner (Pilz & Alexander, 2020; Conrad & Meyer-Ohle, 2023; Hennings et al., 2025), which creates a distinctive entry context that differs fundamentally from the German model:

A1: Japan is notorious for having one of the most difficult labour markets for foreign companies because the system in Japan is structured quite differently.

Second, Japan is characterised by ongoing demographic change and a persistent shortage of younger workers (Hennings et al., 2025). These two structural conditions place many German companies at a disadvantage relative to their Japanese competitors:

U6: Recruiting depends on the market. So today we don't have a choice. It's difficult to recruit candidates with the right background.

Against this backdrop, the following sub-sections address the main dimensions of recruitment strategy. Table 2 provides a consolidated overview; the commentary that follows develops the argument in greater detail for those dimensions that benefit from further discussion.

The interviews show clear differences between applicant groups. In addition to managers (who lie outside the focus of this study), companies recruit both administrative and technical white-collar staff and logistics and production operatives (blue-collar workers). In Japanese companies, some blue-collar roles are filled on a non-permanent basis through temporary employment agencies (Pilz & Alexander, 2011; Keizer, 2009); as external employees, they are not considered further here.

For regular positions, German companies try to target Japanese nationals. Recruitment of blue-collar workers takes place at vocational schools and technical colleges:

Table 2 Overview of Recruitment Strategy Dimensions

Dimension	Key findings	Illustrative quotes
<i>Target groups and qualifications</i>	The majority of German companies recruit Japanese nationals at all skill levels — high-school and technical college graduates for blue-collar roles, and university graduates for intermediate white-collar positions. However, given persistent labour shortages, foreign workers already resident in Japan and recruits from other Asian countries are also considered. The dominant channel remains mid-career professionals (aged in their 30 s or 40 s) with existing industry experience, because (a) German companies are less attractive to new graduates than large Japanese firms, (b) training new graduates is costly and time-consuming, and (c) mid-career recruits typically bring English proficiency and international experience	<i>U1: "So major recruitment is in mid-career. [A] small portion is university graduates."</i> <i>U10: "Due to the lack of young graduates who are suitably trained...we have recently been increasingly turning to colleagues who are not actually Japanese, but come from Ghana, Malaysia or China."</i> <i>A1: "The problem is, of course, that most Japanese people have never heard of most German companies."</i>
<i>Recruitment process</i>	German MNCs rarely maintain structured university partnerships, principally because intake numbers are too small to justify intensive cooperation. Instead, they rely on: (1) alternative intermediary networks (alumni, retired specialists visiting vocational schools); (2) online job portals for operator-level hires; and (3) commercial recruitment agencies for mid-career professionals. Selection de-emphasises university prestige in favour of individual personality, assessed through two or three interviews. Formal qualifications play only a minor role	<i>U5: "For vocational schools, we have a dedicated veteran... who has retired and can still continue work as an engineer to go visit each school every year."</i> <i>A1: "It's all done through recruiters because they can't find them normally."</i> <i>U4: "We don't select by university name... we don't really care so much."</i>
<i>Internships</i>	Internships function as an early-contact recruitment tool and as a brand-building instrument directed at young Japanese talent. Most German companies offer both extended placements (3–6 months) , which provide genuine work experience, and short programmes (2–5 days) that meet the expectations of Japanese universities and students accustomed to brief employer visits. The latter reflect the Japanese norm rather than the German model. Both formats serve the strategic objective of raising company visibility before the formal graduate recruitment season begins	<i>U1: "Three months or six months...It's more like a part-time job for them."</i> <i>U7: "It can be like two days, three days, maybe not even one week. This is kind of typical in Japan."</i>
<i>Influence of German headquarters</i>	Subsidiaries operate with considerable autonomy over headcount decisions and qualification requirements. Control by the parent company is exercised indirectly through negotiated personnel budgets and annual reporting rather than through direct intervention in hiring criteria or processes. Individual senior positions occasionally require headquarters approval, but this is the exception	<i>U4: "I think we're quite flexible and given a lot of freedom...In Japan, we have a very different schedule for hiring younger associates."</i>

Central aspects marked in boldface

U4: Concerning recruiting of operators at the production sites, we are hiring people from the high schools and also technical colleges. In most cases, we are recruiting the operators in the plant from the regional high schools.

University graduates are also recruited for intermediate skill-level positions, though all companies report a shortage of suitable applicants. Against this backdrop, foreign workers — both those already resident in Japan and those recruited from elsewhere in Asia — are increasingly being targeted:

U10: Due to the lack of young graduates who are suitably trained or prepared, we have recently been increasingly turning to colleagues who are not actually Japanese, but come from Ghana, Malaysia or China, for example.

As shown in Table 2, however, the dominant recruitment group across all companies is that of Japanese professionals who already have work experience — “mid-career employees” (Zhu & Hennings, 2019; Peltokorpi & Froese, 2025, p. 8). The preference for mid-career recruits is grounded in three mutually reinforcing factors: the low visibility of German companies among Japanese graduates; the high cost and timescale of training new graduates to operational effectiveness; and the English proficiency and international experience that mid-career candidates typically bring. These advantages outweigh their higher starting salaries:

U3: If the department needs staff immediately, we can't count on new grad hiring. So basically mid-career hiring is the majority, like us as a multinational company.

A1: What I've observed is that most German companies don't hire anyone from university because they say it's far too costly; they have to be trained for years. We only hire people who already have experience.

Where graduate recruitment does occur, companies accept that the students may withdraw from a previously accepted offer before the April start date — a risk inherent in Japan's new-graduate hiring calendar — and that general aptitude (literacy, numeracy, social skills) is weighted more heavily than specific occupational certificates:

U1: They need the technical knowledge and also soft skills like leadership or good communication skills because they interact internationally with the people.

The recruitment process starts with advertising vacant positions. As Table 2 illustrates, German companies rarely maintain extensive university partnerships: the intake is generally too small to sustain formal cooperation, and a lack of suitable applicants makes investing in partnerships seem unproductive. Instead, companies develop alternative intermediary networks — retired specialists who visit vocational schools on their behalf, or alumni who transmit word-of-mouth endorsements through teachers and parents to prospective applicants:

U6: The alumni of the schools in our company are important. It is word of mouth advertisement. They know how good our company is. So they transfer the message to the teacher, the teacher to parents, parents to kids and so on.

For operator-level vacancies, online job portals are the primary advertising channel. For mid-career professionals, commercial recruitment agencies manage both advertising and initial candidate screening, justifying their fees through their large applicant pools and pre-filtering skills. Internal selection emphasises employee personality over external company reputation of former employers, using interviews (typically two rounds) rather than written examinations in the majority of cases.

The dimensions “Internships” and “Influence of German headquarters” will be addressed in the discussion section.

Training

The training of new hires is complex and consists of interrelated elements that distinguish between recent graduates and mid-career employees. Table 3 provides a consolidated overview across all key training dimensions; the subsequent sub-sections elaborate those dimensions where the argument requires extended discussion.

All the companies surveyed have onboarding programmes for both white-collar and blue-collar employees with no prior work experience. These programmes last for between one week and one month. For new white-collar graduates, the initial weeks of the programme combine business etiquette training with structured induction to the company and its products:

U4: We usually have the training for three to four weeks in April. And the first half is usually revolving around two topics. One is general business manners. I think it's a very big deal in Japan. For example, how to exchange business cards. The other is an introduction course about the company. We also spend a few days going to the manufacturing plants to first learn and actually see.

Blue-collar entrants receive specific instruction on health and safety alongside product and process familiarisation. Mid-career professionals undergo only a brief orientation before being allocated directly to their department, where on-the-job training takes over immediately. As Table 3 shows, the differentiated onboarding structure reflects the fundamentally different starting points of these two groups: graduates require socialisation into workplace norms and company identity, while mid-career employees are recruited precisely because they have existing competencies that can be immediately deployed.

After the onboarding phase, newly hired graduates are trained primarily within their respective departments. The dominant mode is on-the-job training (OJT) delivered by experienced colleagues, often through formal mentoring or buddy systems:

U7: One day welcome. Then from the next day, they will be separated into their respective trainings, meaning for plant workers, they go through their direct

Table 3 Overview of Training Strategy Dimensions

Dimension	Key findings	Illustrative quotes
Onboarding	All companies provide structured onboarding lasting one week to one month . New graduate white-collar hires receive classroom instruction in business etiquette (including card exchange and professional conduct), a company and product overview, and visits to production facilities. Blue-collar entrants focus on health, safety and basic product knowledge. Mid-career professionals follow a condensed programme (typically 1 or 2 days) before being directly allocated to their roles, where on-the-job familiarisation takes over	<i>U4: "The first half is usually revolving around two topics. One is general business manners...The other one is an introduction course about the company." U1: "All of them have like 1.5 days orientation...then the mid-careers, they just go to their position and learn about their task but more like on the job training."</i>
Initial & further training	Post-onboarding training is predominantly on-the-job (OJT) through mentors, buddy systems and senior colleagues. Structured off-the-job classroom instruction supplements OJT for more theoretical topics and is delivered by internal subject-matter experts; there are few, if any, train-the-trainer programmes. Company-wide online learning platforms are used globally and are available to Japanese subsidiaries, though their English-only format limits accessibility and necessitates local adaptations. External providers cover language skills and social competencies. There are no detailed curricula: training is demand-driven and varies by role and individual need. Upskilling of senior employees is an emerging priority in response to an ageing workforce and technological change	<i>U3: "Everybody of the operator has a senior buddy...for the first three months and then they can start by themselves." U8: "Problem is, there is English training only...that's why we have to make some sort of in-house training." U5: "The trainer quality must be improved... We need to implement a train-the-trainer programme."</i>
Certification and internal progression	Certification is almost entirely internal : completion of training is recorded in individual training records rather than through individual certificates, and mere participation often suffices. The main exception is state-mandated safety certification (e.g. for hazardous goods handling), which must be obtained through approved external providers. Internally, the accumulation of training activities feeds into career progression frameworks : alongside performance appraisals, training records serve as a basis for career advancement. This link between training completion and career pathways is presented as an incentive to participate, though typically, no externally recognised qualifications are generated	<i>U7: "No, there's actually no certificate. We don't give them certificates. All trainings are basically in the system...it says enrolment completed." U6: "They need to obtain the certificate. It is an official rule for example for dangerous goods handling."</i>

Table 3 (continued)

Dimension	Key findings	Illustrative quotes
German dual training system	Only one company in the sample actively implements a version of the German dual vocational training system. The rationale behind this strategy combines labour market necessity (accessing new talent pools in a tight market) with a quality strategy (ensuring the high service levels that Japanese customers expect). Barriers to adopting the German system are substantial: (1) cooperation with vocational schools is difficult to establish, though declining student numbers have recently made schools more open; (2) German Chamber of Commerce examinations have to be translated from German, adding administrative burden; (3) incompatibility between the Japanese vocational qualification and the German programme requires students to spend four years at vocational school instead of three; and (4) vocational education carries lower social status in Japan than university study, limiting its attractiveness to prospective students	<i>U7: "Long term it's a win-win...We want to invest in these guys because we want them to feel that this is a place where they can learn and develop themselves."</i> <i>A2: "German companies often pursue a high-quality strategy here. And for a high-quality but also expensive product, Japanese customers expect perfect maintenance and customer support."</i> <i>A1: "In Japan, more people tend to go to university...I think that is why this dual system will probably have difficulty finding good people."</i>
Influence of German headquarters	As with recruitment, the influence of German parent companies on training is consistently described as low . Subsidiaries design their own onboarding and initial training programmes. The main indirect influence comes from globally developed online course libraries (typically in English), which are made available group-wide; however, to be usable in Japan, these courses frequently require local language adaptation. Budget guidelines are the principal control instrument. Both subsidiaries and headquarters view training not as a cost to be minimised but as a strategic investment necessary to sustain competitiveness in the Japanese market	<i>U4: "So generally, we decide on our own what would be the concept of the onboarding and the initial training."</i> <i>U7: "When you look at new graduate training, the investment there, I think it's a company's obligation."</i>

Central aspects marked in boldface

working environment...All of the foremen start teaching them because it's a matter of life. They go through a few months of training in actual real life.

Off-the-job classroom instruction supplements OJT for more theoretical topics. Internal subject experts serve as trainers, though a structured train-the-trainer programme is largely absent — a gap that several respondents identified as a quality risk:

U5: The trainer quality must be improved. And because we don't have any training. We need to implement a train-the-trainer programme.

Company-specific online learning platforms complement these activities. Although these are deployed globally, their English-only format restricts usability for Japanese employees and necessitates in-house adaptations. External providers are used — particularly for language and soft-skills development — when internal participant numbers are insufficient to justify developing bespoke programmes. Across all for-

mats, the driver of training activities is the needs profile of the company and not, by contrast with Germany, formal curricula.

For mid-career employees and longer-serving staff, further training to accommodate new technologies and products is a consistent priority. An ageing workforce has intensified this imperative in several companies:

U4: We are facing the ageing society, ageing organisation. We need to utilise the capacity of senior and experienced associates. But they cannot survive with their existing competencies. So we are also investing some effort in the education of the senior associates.

As Table 3 shows, certification is almost exclusively internal to the company: training completion is logged in individual records rather than in formal certificates, and participation alone often suffices to satisfy requirements. The only systematic exception is state-mandated safety certification for regulated activities such as hazardous goods handling, which requires externally accredited programmes. Internally, training records feed into career progression frameworks — a deliberate design choice intended to incentivise participation and signal that investment in employee development is tied to advancement opportunities.

The German dual vocational training system (Fuerstenau et al., 2014) represents a qualitatively different — and considerably more demanding — approach than this predominantly informal certification landscape. Indeed, only one company in the sample is currently implementing the German system, and that for only a small number of participants. This rationale reflects a tight labour market logic combined with a quality-service focus (see Table 3).

The remaining nine companies cite four interconnected barriers to implementing the German dual vocational training system. First, establishing cooperation with vocational schools remains structurally difficult because the long-standing norm in Japan is to separate educational institutions from business involvement; declining student numbers have made vocational schools marginally more receptive, but the relationship is not yet routine. Second, German Chamber of Commerce examinations have to be translated from German, creating a significant administrative overhead. Third, structural incompatibility between the Japanese vocational school curriculum and the German apprenticeship programme forces students to complete four years at a vocational school rather than three, as in Germany. Fourth, and most fundamentally, vocational education carries lower social status in Japan than university education:

A1: You have to realise that in Japan, more people tend to go to university, even if it is a technical college or something similar, because it is extremely important socially to have a university degree. And I think that is why this dual system will probably have difficulty finding good people who are willing to take the plunge and do it, even though it has not been tried and tested and therefore has no reputation.

Taken together, these barriers explain why the dual system remains a marginal approach despite its theoretical fit with the quality-oriented positioning of German

MNCs in Japan. Its limited adoption is itself an instructive finding: the structural conditions that make the German model work at home (institutional embeddedness, parity of esteem for vocational routes, and deep cooperation between vocational schools and training companies) are precisely those that are absent – or at least underdeveloped – in Japan. The dimension “Influence of German headquarters” will be addressed in the discussion section.

Discussion

These findings are discussed below against the background of the three research questions articulated in the Introduction. To this end, the aggregated findings from the sample of German companies in Japan (structured on the basis of the multi-level concept (Table 1)) are compared with the typical recruitment and training strategies of Japanese companies in Japan (Table 4). Statements about large Japanese companies are related to relevant literature (see, for example, Peltokorpi & Froese, 2016, 2025; Conrad & Meyer-Ohle, 2023; Hennings et al., 2025; Hori, 2009; Kosugi 2007). This generalisation is legitimate in the Japanese context as, unlike those in many other countries, most Japanese companies follow a largely uniform and cross-company approach to recruitment and training (Hennings et al., 2025). This extensive standardisation is based both on government guidelines or recommendations and on the way Japan’s most prestigious large companies operate and whose strategy serves as a blueprint for less prestigious companies (Pilz & Alexander, 2011).

A comparison of the strategies employed by German companies operating in Japan and local big Japanese companies reveals significant differences, particularly with regard to recruitment. German companies recruit only a small number of bachelor’s degree holders, whereas these individuals are the key target group for larger Japanese companies. Japanese companies regularly have a network of partnerships with universities that have a similar reputation in the public perception to that of the companies themselves (Peltokorpi et al. 2016; Peltokorpi & Froese, 2025; Pilz & Alexander, 2020; Hori, 2007). These ‘balanced’ networks do not generally exist among German companies in Japan.

As a result, German companies prefer to hire mid-career employees to meet their staffing needs, very often with a focus on those from abroad: they largely avoid competition for university graduates, which leads many Japanese companies to start recruiting applicants at an earlier and earlier stage in their studies (Hennings et al., 2022, 2025).

In contrast, there are no major differences between the activities of German and Japanese companies with regard to onboarding activities for all new employees and initial training of career entrants (Pilz & Alexander, 2020). For career entrants, short-duration initial overview phases dominate, followed by individual on-the-job training over several months (Debroux, 2014). This generally unstructured induction means that there is no certification of these activities.

Further training for mid-career recruits and employees who have been with the company for a long time differs between German and Japanese companies. The majority of German companies rely on globally available online training courses,

Table 4 Aggregated Findings Relating to German Companies' Strategy for Recruiting and Training Employees at the Intermediate Skill Level in Japan Contrasted with Generalised Strategies of Japanese Companies in Japan

Aspect	Strategies of German companies in Japan	Strategies of Japanese companies in Japan
Recruitment		
<i>Target groups and qualifications sought</i>	Dominant focus on mid-career professionals with professional experience and English language skills Foreign employees are in high demand	Dominant focus on Japanese bachelor's degree graduates without professional experience
<i>Recruitment process</i>	Mid-career professionals are mainly recruited through recruitment agencies Positions for career starters are advertised via electronic media Selection process via tests and interviews Appointment mainly on 1 April	Applicants are approached via networks with universities and recommendations Positions are also advertised via electronic media Selection process via tests and interviews Appointment on 1 April
<i>Internships</i>	Internships for students are often offered for periods ranging from a few days to several months	Internships for students are offered for a period of a few days
Training		
<i>Onboarding process</i>	Introduction to the corporate world (a few days to a few weeks) for all new employees	Introduction to the company (a few days to a few weeks) for all new employees
<i>Initial training</i>	Only for career entrants. Primarily on-the-job training by non-certified personnel. The training is work process-oriented and individualised. In some areas, this is supplemented by off-the-job training, often provided by external training providers	Only for career entrants. Primarily on-the-job training by non-specially trained personnel. The training is work process-oriented and individualised. In some areas, this is supplemented by in-house off-the-job training
<i>Further training</i>	Predominantly globally available online training courses	On- and off-the-job training, supplemented partially by in-house online learning
<i>Certification and internal progression routes</i>	Explicit certification of training is rare. However, qualifications acquired are recorded internally and serve as a basis for the progression route for all regular employees	Explicit certification of training is rare. However, the qualifications acquired are recorded internally. The influence of training on career development is low

while Japanese companies offer on- and off-the-job training as well as digital courses provided locally and internally by the company (Debroux, 2014). When German companies offer face-to-face training, they often turn to external training providers.

In terms of the EPRG approach outlined above, the findings demonstrate that German companies in Japan (at least in our sample) pursue different strategies in parallel with regard to recruitment and training. While they act largely identically to Japanese companies in the area of onboarding and initial training, a different approach is particularly evident in recruitment. However, the strategy pursued in this regard is not part of the existing EPRG approach. Although recruitment methods do not mirror those of other local Japanese companies, the strategy of the home country (Germany) or a global or regional strategy is not implemented either. Instead, local contextual factors are taken into account and used strategically: the shortage of university gradu-

ates and their lack of interest in German companies as employers is offset by focusing on the pool of mid-career applicants. This strategy should therefore be referred to as “independent localisation” and contrasted with that of Japanese companies, thus expanding the EPRG approach (Table 5). The need for, and innovation represented by, this strategy reflect the fact that the existing EPRG typology is an ideal type and cannot capture a real-world type that is independent of the country of origin. It also has a different structure and a strategy that exists in parallel to – and is distinct from – that of the host country.

The data presented here largely correspond to the findings of the only existing relevant (but smaller-scale and older) study (Pilz 2016b). In particular, the extensive independence of German subsidiaries in Japan from their parent company is currently evident in terms of personnel policy. However, the more detailed data collected here shows that globally oriented online learning in particular has a significant impact on further training. The development of digital media over the last decade is likely to have played a particularly important role in this change and emphasises the geocentric approach in this area (Table 5).

This reveals another key finding. As already documented in Pilz (2016b) small-scale study, the German dual training system for initial training plays no role in German companies in Japan. The only exception is a company that offers a dual training programme for a small number of young people in cooperation with the German Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Japan. However, this is only a small-scale and isolated solution, as similar studies in other countries such as India have also found (Pilz & Wiemann, 2021).

These findings lead explicitly to the third research question. Looking at the factors in Japan that influence the strategies chosen by the subsidiaries surveyed, we can identify important influences already revealed by interview responses (see Fig. 1). The factors identified by Pilz & Wiemann (2021) on the basis of a study in India, China and Mexico, such as the role of the education system, the role of the labour market or the reputation of various educational pathways and careers, may be helpful here. When these are projected on to Japan, several key influencing factors can be identified (Pudelko, 2006).

In the light of the influences detected, it is meaningful to interpret the motives behind companies’ actions from a theoretical perspective using the “institutional logic” approach (Zoellner, 2020, see above).

As outlined above, school and university students in Japan tend to receive mainly theoretical instruction; practical experience and insights into the world of work feature more rarely. At the same time, demographic change is reducing the availability of young people, and German companies are often unfamiliar and unattractive to Japanese graduates. If German companies in Japan want to address these contextual conditions, recruiting mid-career professionals offers a proven solution, as this group is not in demand from many larger Japanese companies (Hori & Nakajima 2018, p.

Table 5 Strategies of German Companies in Japan in Relation to the (extended) EPRG Approach

Focus	Recruitment	Initial training	Further training
Strategy	Independent localisation	Polycentric (localisation)	Geocentric

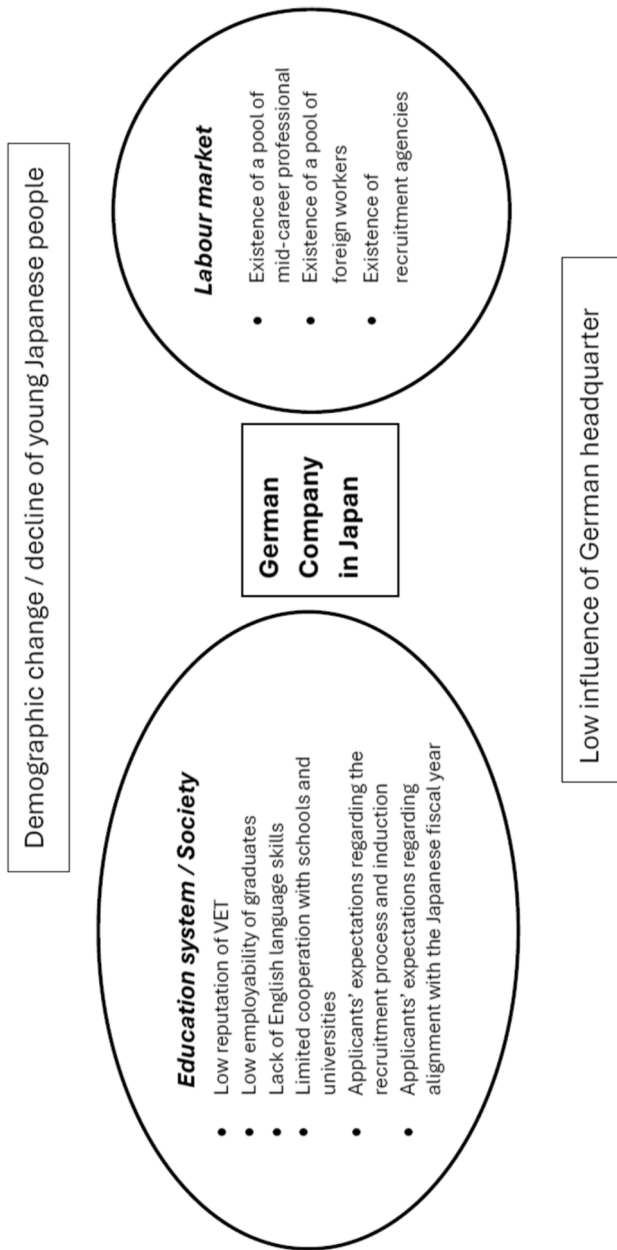


Fig. 1 External Influences Affecting Recruitment and Training of German MNC's in Japan

100). This group also already has the relevant professional experience. When recruiting career entrants, German companies – unlike many Japanese companies (Hennings et al., 2025) – offer longer internships to enable this group to gain initial work experience before starting regular employment.

With regard to initial training, German companies act logically in that they take into account the expectations of new employees for a shorter onboarding period followed by on-the-job training, which is typical in Japan. This also offers companies a cost-effective form of induction training. The fulfilment of expectations of local employees targeted for recruitment is also evident in relation to their previous employment. Hiring in Japan generally takes place on 1 April (Heeb & Yamauchi, 2023), so mid-career professionals want to change jobs on this date, and German companies follow the local pattern here.

As far as further training is concerned, cost advantages and certain forms of international standardisation are achieved through the use of global online learning options. In addition, German companies can anticipate that their employees will not expect comprehensive certification, something that is rather uncommon in Japan. This means that the skills acquired remain within the company and cannot be generally verified on the labour market, reducing employee turnover. As other studies have also found (Suzuki et al., 2015), learning English and developing intercultural skills generally play an important role for German companies in Japan.

Our data indicate strongly that the German dual training system will be difficult to establish in Japan because of a number of external factors. The following statement from an interview can be cited as a summary of the entire study:

U10: So it's hopeless for us to go against the Japanese mainstream. We have to live with what we have here.

In addition to more pragmatic problems, such as the difficulty of cooperating with vocational schools, the expectations of the young people involved are particularly important here. Vocational education and training are not as highly regarded in Japan as higher education (Pilz & Sakano, 2023). Moreover, German companies are often less attractive than large Japanese companies (Peltokorpi et al., 2019). Finally, the German model of practical training, with trainees alternating between vocational school and the workplace, is a training mode that is completely foreign to Japanese young people and their parents.

Consequently, the transfer of German dual initial training practices – which is also problematic in other countries (see, for example, Gessler, 2017; Li & Pilz, 2021; Valiente et al. 2025; Pilz & Wiemann, 2021) – is particularly difficult in the case of Japan and failed in a pilot project in Japan as far back as the 1980s (Alexander, 1993).

In summary, it can be said for all areas of recruitment and training that the Japanese context has a very strong influence on the strategies of German companies. Against this backdrop, the literature often refers to “institutional stickiness” or “path dependency” (Hennings et al., 2025), which becomes particularly apparent in relation to maintaining the Japanese fiscal year as a timetable for recruitment. At the same time, companies respond to these influencing factors and try to act as optimally as possible under the given conditions in accordance with “institutional logic”, com-

binning local adaptations with the conditions as international companies (Caprar et al., 2022; Taussig, 2017; Vogelsang & Pilz, 2021).

From a theoretical perspective, the study demonstrates that neo-institutional approaches can highlight the embedded nature of recruitment and training strategies. Furthermore, the “institutional logic” approach can reveal the motives underlying corporate behaviour.

The findings also have interesting implications for the conceptual and theoretical aspects of VET in particular. For instance, the results generated for Japan in this context correspond very well with the “varieties of skill formation” model used by Busemeyer and Trampusch (2012). The authors classify Japan as a “segmentalist skill formation system” (p. 13) and view it as a special case of VET in which there is virtually no state involvement. Instead, according to the authors’ typology, VET is delivered and financed exclusively by the companies themselves. While this classification is derived primarily in an abstract manner within the context of political economy, the data generated in the study presented here underpin such a conclusion in much greater detail across the three distinct levels of a VET system (see Table 4).

Finally, the findings presented here can also be directly linked to the “training cultures” approach developed for VET Dellori & Pilz (2026). This approach, drawing on neo-institutional theories, also highlights the unique nature of VET in each individual country. Historical developments, legislation, stakeholders, societal expectations, as well as the structure and regulation of the general education system and the labour market, mean that VET systems are shaped by country-specific factors. The study presented here is innovative in that this concept has not previously been applied to Japan. The findings demonstrate that in Japan too, external influences are of particular importance for the design of VET processes and that, consequently, a Japan-specific training culture exists. However, because of their outsider status, German companies are able to adopt this specifically Japanese training culture to only a limited extent. In other countries, by contrast, foreign companies adapt the host country’s training culture to a much greater extent (Pilz et al., 2023).

Conclusions

Returning to our title, “Big in Japan?”, the following conclusions can be drawn with regard to recruitment and training. German companies in Japan are definitely “big” in the sense that they are successful in adapting to the highly influential Japanese context. These German companies have established their HR strategy in this niche in a very homogeneous manner, laying the foundation for the economic success of their business activities in Japan.

The study has implications for research methodology. In particular, the extension it offers of the EPRG approach by adding the “independent localisation” type also represents an innovation in the conceptual and theoretical basis of comparative VET research (Evans, 2020). This new type demonstrates that, whilst local adaptations to external influences are certainly feasible for foreign MNCs, such adaptations do not necessarily have to be structured in exactly the same way as in national companies. Particularly against the backdrop of the current renewed and intense debate on the

transfer of VET between different countries (Valiente et al. 2025; Li & Pilz, 2021), this extension may assist with the analytical reconstruction of VET realities in different countries. At the same time, the study has added to, collected and evaluated current findings in a field of VET research within Japan that has received very little academic attention to date.

In practical terms, the findings provide broad confirmation of the strategies so far pursued by German companies already operating in Japan. For German newcomers entering the Japanese market, they may therefore serve as a guide to future needs in the areas of recruitment and training.

However, the study has several limitations. The small number of companies involved means that our findings cannot be generalised unreflectively. For example, based on the data collected here, the specifics of individual German companies – such as size, industry or length of time operating in the country – and, particularly, external factors in the local environment had no major impact on training strategy. This could well differ in a larger study, as the strong influence of external factors has been observed in other countries (Vogelsang & Pilz, 2021).

However, the apparent saturation of the findings means that it can be assumed that the non-random selection of companies and the small sample size had no major influence on the significance of the findings. It should also be noted that, as the findings demonstrate, individual case studies are of primary importance in the qualitative research of the type conducted here. Meanwhile, the interviews enabled an in-depth and detailed analysis of these case studies.

Future research should therefore consider more case studies in different regions of Japan. It would also be useful to document strategic changes over time in order to gain insights into the interaction between Japanese contextual factors and the recruitment and training strategies of German companies in Japan.

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Data Availability No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate The study was conducted in line with the guidelines of the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Management, Economics and Social Sciences of the University of Cologne (see: <https://wiso.uni-koeln.de/en/faculty/ethics-and-responsibility/ethics-committee>).

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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