



Winning the Race for Global Talent: Japan's Bid to Attract Southeast Asia's Best -The Shared Future of Asia and Japan-



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From Southeast Asia to Japan: Robust Support System That Draws Top Talent.

An increasing number of Japanese companies are looking to secure *kodo gaikokujinzai*—highly skilled international talent. Southeast Asia, in particular, is drawing keen attention.

Tomato Co., Ltd., a smartphone app development firm based in Shibuya Ward, Tokyo, was founded in 1988 by President & CEO Bae Han-Tae, originally from South Korea. Today, about 70% its roughly 175 employees are international recruits from South Korea, China, Vietnam, and Indonesia.

According to a report by the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), Bae notes that with declining birthrates and aging populations in both Japan and South Korea making it harder to secure talent, “we are shifting our hiring focus to Southeast Asia and India.” He personally travels to Indonesia and Vietnam to find promising candidates. “Overseas talents are not only highly skilled but also bring a passion to succeed—having come all the way to Japan, they are exceptionally committed,” he says, adding that the company’s aim is not simply to fill labor gaps, but to recognize and reward ability and motivation.

Bae stresses that successful recruitment hinges on a solid support structure and an understanding of employees’ individual needs.

Muhammad Aljundi, from Indonesia, studied IT at the University of Indonesia before joining Tomato in February 2024. He says he chose the company for its “strong support system for international staff.” Tomato handles visa applications on behalf of new hires, greets them at the airport, and offers fully furnished company dormitories. When Aljundi, a Muslim, joined the team, the company introduced prayer breaks during work hours—adjusting lunch times to accommodate the change.

Major eyewear chain OWNDAYS Inc., employs highly skilled international talent across roughly 10% of its 1,200-strong workforce, with staff hailing from a wide range of countries and regions, including China, Taiwan, South Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, Italy, and France.

In recent years, 20 to 30 of the roughly 200 new graduates the company hires annually have come from overseas. With stores in Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Cambodia, OWNDAYS is actively expanding its recruitment of international staff. At its outlets in Japan, rising inbound demand is driving the need for employees who can serve customers in multiple languages. The company offers comprehensive support, even acting as guarantors when arranging housing for recruits. According to OWNDAYS, international employees not only meet the needs of a diverse customer base but also contribute to a more vibrant workplace by bringing perspectives different from those of their Japanese colleagues.

From Closed Borders to Welcoming Global Talent

Kodo gaikokujinzai—highly skilled international talent—refers to foreign nationals with at least a university-level education working in Japan under statuses of residence such as “Engineer/Specialist in Humanities/International Services,” “Highly Skilled Professional,” or “Business Manager.”

In 2012, the Japanese government introduced the “Points-Based Preferential Immigration Treatment for Highly Skilled Foreign Professionals,” awarding points for factors such as education, professional experience, income, age, achievements, and position. Those scoring 70 points are certified as highly skilled professionals. Unlike technical intern trainees—whose stays are limited to a maximum of 5 years with the expectation of returning home—these professionals are eligible for long-term residence and employment in Japan. The cumulative number of certifications has grown from just 313 at the end of 2012 to 55,688 by the end of 2024, a 178-fold increase. In 2023, the government also launched the Japan System for Special Highly Skilled Professionals (J-Skip), offering additional benefits such as work eligibility for spouses and permission to bring parents to Japan.

For many years, Japan was seen as reluctant to accept foreign workers, earning it the reputation of a “labor-closed country.” As of 2023, foreign-born residents made up only about 2% of Japan’s total population—well below the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries’ average of 11%.

Today, however, Japan’s population is declining at an unprecedented pace. In 2024, the number of babies born to Japanese parents fell to a record low of 686,061, down 5.7% from the previous year. The total fertility rate—the average number of children a woman has over her lifetime—also dropped to an all-time low of 1.15. To sustain economic growth, Japan can no longer delay opening its doors and securing highly skilled international talent. Welcoming a more diverse workforce not only revitalizes corporate culture but also strengthens the country’s ability to meet inbound tourism demand and expand into overseas markets.

Regional Japan Makes Talent-Seeking Missions to Southeast Asia

In the Tokyo metropolitan area—home to a large population of international students—securing highly skilled talent is relatively straightforward. But in regions far from major cities, you can’t attract talent simply by waiting.

Mie Prefecture, in central Japan, boasts a strong manufacturing and tourism sector but sits about 500 kilometers from Tokyo, with no airport or Shinkansen access, and little existing connection to international residents. To address these challenges, in August 2024, the Mie Prefectural Government held its first joint information session in Vietnam for university students, bringing together Mie-based small and medium-sized enterprises seeking engineers, interpreters, designers, and other skilled professionals.

In January 2025, Governor Katsuyuki Ichimi visited both Vietnam's Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs and the Hanoi University of Science and Technology, the country's leading science and engineering institution, signing memorandums of understanding with both institutions on securing more workers. "Mie Prefecture is home to a diverse range of industries, from automobiles and semiconductors to petrochemicals. In particular, our shipment value of manufactured electronic devices has ranked first nationwide for 19 consecutive years," he emphasized. This fiscal year, Mie plans to expand its outreach, holding similar joint information sessions in Indonesia. Such talent-seeking missions to Southeast Asia are becoming increasingly common among prefectures and municipalities located far from Japan's major urban centers.

Toward Becoming the Destination of Choice for Global Talent

Low birthrates and labor shortages are challenges confronting countries and regions worldwide. Japan must secure highly skilled international talent while competing not only with South Korea and Taiwan, but also with Europe and the Middle East. Achieving this will require Japanese companies to continue evolving.

Southeast Asia, with its young population and abundant talent in sectors such as IT, engineering, machinery, and construction, offers Japan significant opportunities. Yet foreign professionals working in Japan frequently express dissatisfaction with issues such as long working hours, excessive meetings, and slow promotion. These entrenched aspects of Japan's work culture are often cited as contributing factors to low labor productivity, weakened competitiveness, and prolonged economic stagnation.

For Japan to regain economic momentum, government and industry must work together to create an environment that attracts highly skilled international talent, making Japan a compelling place to work and a destination of choice.

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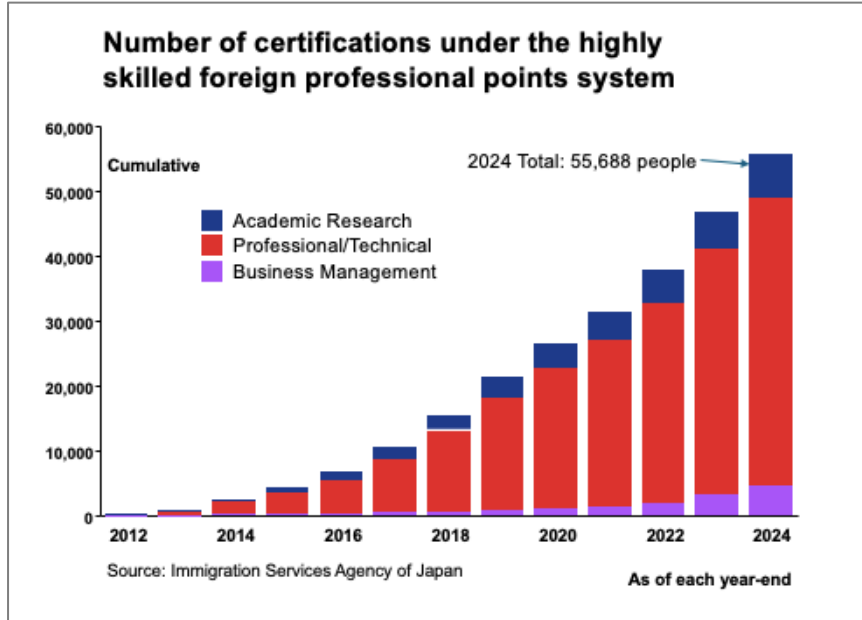


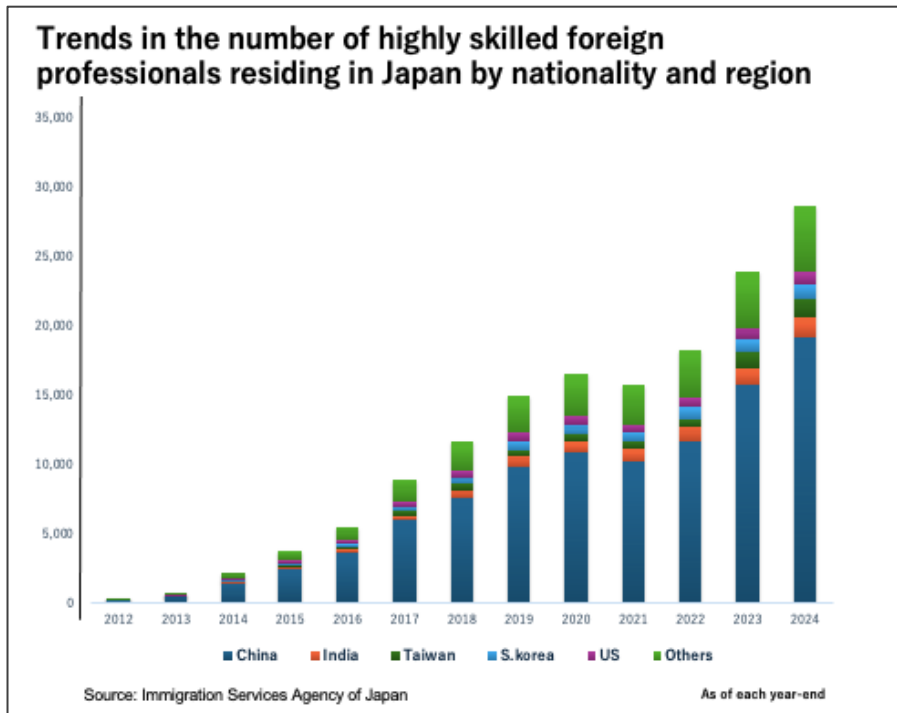
Chart showing the annual figures for foreign workers in Japan since 2008, by industry sector
([Immigration Services of Japan](#)) . (c) Jiji Press

2



This long exposure picture shows the overpass (front), which is a part of the metropolitan expressway, as the city's skyline is seen from the Odaiba Marine Park in Tokyo. (c) AFP=Jiji

3,



Trends in the number of highly skilled foreign professionals residing in Japan by nationality and region. ([Immigration Services of Japan](#)). (c) AFPBBNews