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Change and Continuity in Japanese Employment Practices:
Transformations in- and outside the Internal Labour Market

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CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN JAPANESE EMPLOYMENT PRACTICES; TRANSFORMATIONS IN- AND OUTSIDE THE INTERNAL LABOUR MARKET

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ABSTRACT
The weak performance of the Japanese economy since the 1990s has renewed the debate on the efficiency of its employment practices like lifetime employment and seniority wages. Although actual changes have long trailed these expectations, two major developments have taken place in recent years: a rise in non-regular employment and the introduction of performance-related pay (seikashugi). Both affect the internal labour markets that have been crucial in the governance of Japanese employment. The first diminishes its relevance and the second directly impacts its functioning. This paper discusses these changes and their consequences. It tells a story of change and continuity: change is taking place but this has not altered the ‘logic’ of Japanese employment based on the core practice of lifetime employment as new instruments have been aligned with the remaining practices. The paper concludes with some general insights for the study of employment issues.

KEYWORDS
Japan, employment practices, institutional change, internal labour markets, performance-related pay, non-regular employment
INTRODUCTION
Since the 1970s the world has taken notice of Japan's remarkable economic success and the possibilities for the 'Japanization' of industry were widely discussed and hotly debated (e.g. Oliver and Wilkinson, 1992; Womack et al., 1990; Elger and Smith, 1994). Japan's employment practices were often considered to be one of the cornerstones of this economic success and inspired approaches like the 'excellence movement' (Peters and Waterman, 1982) and the model of 'the flexible firm' (Atkinson, 1987). However, although these practices continue to be acknowledged as a model for 'high-performance management' (Doeringer et al., 2003), the burst of the economic bubble in 1989 and the subsequent lack of economic recovery changed the positive perception. The critical acclaim of previous decades made way for a renewed discussion of their efficiency and the need for adjustment, both in the academic and popular Japanese business press (e.g. Ornatowski, 1998; Holzhausen, 2000; Watanabe, 2003; Utanabe, 2000; Katsunori, 2001). This debate also extended to that on the demise of the 'Japanese model' in which the employment practices feature heavily (e.g. Whittaker and Kurusawa, 1998; Dore, 1998). At the same time, actual change has long trailed expectations. Changes in Japanese employment practices and the 'Japanese model' have been expected ever since their typical character was first described by Abegglen (1958). Even the predominantly positive evaluations since the 1970s did not alter this expectation (e.g. Abegglen, 1973; OECD, 1973). However, actual changes have long been limited to the periphery of employment practices.

It is with these issues in mind that this paper presents and analyses the changes in Japanese employment practices around the turn to the 21st century. A study among major Japanese firms shows two developments that stand out: a rise in performance-related pay (seikashugi) and a rise in non-regular employment. Both have a direct impact on the internal labour markets that have been crucial in the governance of Japanese employment. The rise in non-regular employment will diminish its relevance while the rise in performance-related pay directly impacts its functioning. The paper discusses these developments and particularly aims to analyse their mutual dependencies as the developments within and outside the internal labour market can be linked to each other. It argues that the rise in non-regular employment, and the underlying duality between regular and non-regular employment, has enabled Japanese firms to maintain the internal labour markets for their core employees. In accordance, the changes, in spite of their extent and variety, do not fundamentally challenge but can be said to uphold the 'logic' of Japanese employment practices. The structure of the argument is as follows. After a short description of the study design, the paper provides the necessary background by discussing the economic need for and the likelihood of change. It then discusses the major changes in Japanese employment practices and concludes with an overall assessment of the outcomes and the process of change. All sections underline that the developments are characterised by both change and continuity.

STUDY DESIGN
This paper is based on an extensive study in 2002/2003 on changing employment practices in response to the economic problems that confronted Japanese firms in the 1990s and the early years of the 21st century. The study was held among major Japanese firms, resulting in case-studies of firms in four different industries: three in automobiles, two in construction, six in electronics, and three in retailing. The case-studies are based on interviews with representatives of the firms' human resource departments and additional data. At the initial stages of the study, interviews were also held with line managers but they provided little additional information as the questions concerned employment policies and they were not repeated in the latter stages of the study. A list of case-study interview questions was developed based on the existing literature. The interviews were semi-structured, which allowed the flexibility to explore the specific situation of the company while making sure that the core topics (e.g. the different types of employment contracts, the criteria for evaluation, the issue of lifetime employment) were discussed in all interviews. Because the interviews took place during a six-month period it was possible to test formulated hypotheses during subsequent interviews. Most interviews were held in Japanese, a few in English. During most a Japanese assistant was present, both to assist in case of misunderstandings and to discuss the outcomes afterwards. The interviewees were also asked to fill in a questionnaire with additional questions and to provide documents concerning the firm's human resource management like evaluation forms. The information thus obtained was augmented by existing labour market statistics and Japanese studies on changes in human resource management. Finally, interviews with
representatives of the employers’ organisation Nippon Keidanren and the trade union organisation Rengo provided additional context.

**JAPANESE EMPLOYMENT PRACTICES AND THE LIKELIHOOD OF CHANGE**

As previous decades have shown that the expectation of change cannot be taken at face value, we must first establish the need for change and the form that changes are likely to take. An obvious starting point is provided by the economic analyses of Japanese employment practices in recent decades. These analyses have related the employment practices to the organisation of work in the typical Japanese firm and the skills this requires and promotes. Fundamental has been the work of Aoki (1988, 1990), who introduced the ‘J-firm’ as an explanatory abstraction to analyse the specific economic rationale of the large Japanese firm. It stresses an organisation of work characterised by the existence of simple, broad job descriptions and an ambiguity or fluidity of jurisdiction. The broad skills required for such functional flexibility are taught through a combination of job rotation and on-the-job training (Aoki, 1988; Koike, 1995, 1997) and tend to be firm-specific (Mincer and Higuchi, 1988; Matsuoka, 2002).

The governance of employment in Japanese organisations can be directly related to this organisation mode. It provides the long-term perspective necessary for skill specificity, job rotation and on-the-job training through a basic structure known as a ‘ranking hierarchy’ (e.g. Aoki, 1988; Itoh, 1994; Imada, 1995). Within this hierarchy, remuneration is dependent on an employee’s vertical and horizontal rank. Vertical ranks are associated with hierarchical titles and promotion to a higher vertical rank (shōshin) implies changes in authority and responsibility. The horizontal ranks, on the other hand, are artificially created grades, used for a differential treatment of individuals in terms of status and pay only, and promotion to a higher horizontal rank (shōkaku) does not imply a change in authority, responsibility, or job. Crucial is the so-called ‘ability qualification system’ or ‘qualification grading system’ (shokunō shikaku seido), which translates the results of personal assessment into ranks. This system was introduced at the end of the 1960s to complement the seniority rule and its importance has been increasing ever since. Instead of simply assuming that longer tenure implies higher productivity it actively monitors the development of human capital (Holzhausen, 2000).

The economic implications of this type of employment governance show when we analyse its outcomes: the rising wage-tenure profile and the long-term employment relationship that have become known as seniority wages (nenkō jōretsu) and lifetime employment (shōshin kōyō). Besides a reflection of a higher productivity through firm-specific skills (Becker, 1964), they can be explained by interpreting seniority wages as a delayed compensation that induces greater effort (Lazear, 1979). In accordance, Itoh (1994) describes promotion in Japanese firms as a so-called ‘late-selection approach’ in which ‘career concerns’ are used as an incentive device. The ranking hierarchy plays a crucial role in this. First, the horizontal ranks provide elaborate possibilities to differentiate between employees and to use the promotion system as an incentive device. Moreover, the ranking hierarchy provides some flexibility in the number of promotional positions as the ranking concerns the person rather than the job and ‘firms may lead workers to perceive that there is always room at the top for a good performer’ (Aoki, 1988: 75). This flexibility is also related to Aoki’s claim that it is misleading to refer to the ranking hierarchy as an internal labour market. However, this appears an unnecessary constraint as the ranking hierarchy shares the core characteristics of the salaried type of an internal labour market like exclusivity of membership, employment security, and person-related wages (Osterman, 1988; Dore, 1989). Moreover, the freedom to create promotional positions is limited. The ranks are not directly associated with specific jobs but a rather strong correlation exists as certain ranks are a necessity for performing certain jobs (Itoh, 1994) and the motivational strength of this approach requires that employees are promoted to a higher rank when they require the necessary skills. Imano (1995) therefore calls Japanese management ‘supply-side oriented’. Moreover, promotion implies higher wages and these must be justified by similar increases in productivity and this requires promotion to positions that make use of the increased skills.

This set of practices has served Japanese firms well. However, the current forces towards change, both cyclical and structural, appear unprecedented. An initial argument for adjustment concerns the economic malaise of the ‘lost decade’ but the debate on employment practices is more than a reflex to the lack of economic growth and we can distinguish various structural developments. Some of these concern the organisation of work. Although the ‘holistic’
management that characterises this structure can be found in most industries (Keizer, 2005), its success has been limited to manufacturing industries characterised by product diversity, continuous environmental change, and high risk correlation and technological complementarities between production activities (Aoki, 1988). These contingencies correspond to the industries in which Japanese firms have been successful like automobiles and electronics, so-called ‘complex product’ industries whose production processes involve a large number of components, functions, and process steps (Dyer, 1996: 650). However, the importance of these industries within the Japanese economy is diminishing because of the shift from manufacturing to service industries and the so-called ‘kudōka’ or ‘hollowing-out’ of industries (Legewie, 1997). In addition, the continued efficiency in these ‘complex product’ industries has also been questioned as the rise to technological leadership calls for specialist rather than firm-specific skills (Nikkeiren, 1995; 1996) and developments in information technology have given rise to alternative organisational structures (Aoki, 1995a; 1995b).

Even more important are the developments that have directly affected the employment practices. First, the weak economy has created an urgent need among many firms to reduce labour costs. Moreover, the efficiency of the employment practices has suffered from the strong and long-time decline in economic growth and the ageing of the population. Organisational growth has always been a major contingency for the success of the employment practices as it enabled the firm to hire additional young employees, thus keeping average wage costs low under the practice of seniority wages, and to create the positions for promotion so important for motivation through ‘career concerns’ (e.g. Matsuzuka, 2002; Matanle, 2003). This contingency was fulfilled during most of the post-war period but this changed when growth, which had already been falling since the 1970s, became insignificant or even negative during many years in the 1990s. The percentage of firms with negative growth in sales during the 1990s amounted to 52.8 per cent, a strong rise from the 10.8 per cent of the preceding decade (Economic Planning Agency, 1999). At the same time, even with continued high growth, the necessary number of young people would simply not have been there as the Japanese society has been ageing faster than any other (Japan Institute of Labour, 2004a).

In the face of these developments, change appears a necessity and a wide variety of possible adjustments has been proposed and implemented (see Seisansei Rōdō Jōhō Sentā, 2002 for an extensive overview). However, mere economic arguments might not be sufficient to initiate fundamental change as it is well-documented that institutions often become normative and achieve a legitimacy not directly related to their functional efficiency (e.g. DiMaggio and Powell, 1991; Friedland and Alford, 1991). This also holds for the Japanese employment practices, and in particular the core practice of lifetime employment, as they have achieved a strong embeddedness within Japanese society. While it can be said to originate from post-war agreements on job security between employers and labour unions (Gordon, 1985), lifetime employment became widely supported; not only by employers and employees but also by the judiciary (Araki, 2002) and the state (Gao, 2001; Ohtake, 2001). High economic growth strengthened the support as the employment practices came to be seen as one of its major cornerstones. Lifetime employment became the self-obvious and inextricable element of Japanese employment governance and ‘a normative model for the rest of society’ (Dore, 1973: 305). Moreover, the support extends beyond lifetime employment as the employment practices tend to be strongly dependent upon one another through, what Dore (1998) terms ‘institutional interlock’ and ‘psychological consonance’. This is illustrated by the more common reference to the ‘Japanese employment system’. Processes of institutional change are therefore likely to be incremental and path dependent (North, 1993).

Examples of the importance of legitimacy are numerous. Compliance has, for instance, been crucial in recruiting first-class employees as college graduates consider job security and a firm’s reputation the two most important criteria for selecting an employer (Usui and Colignon, 1996). In addition, vehement media and public reactions to proposed employment adjustments in the mid 1990s made that several companies withdrew their plans for dismissals (Ibid.). In addition, the different parties employers, employees, the government, and the judiciary - all display a continued support (Keizer, 2005). This is also confirmed by the ‘traditional’ strategies firms have undertaken to adjust labour input like natural attrition and employment restraint (Japan Institute of Labour, 2001, 2002a; Nihon Rōdō Kenkyū Kikō, 2002) and the overall rise in employment duration (Chuma, 1997; Matsuzuka,
We can thus conclude that major changes in lifetime employment appear unlikely and can agree with past observations that describe the possibility for change as ‘a constrained choice imposed by strong employment security’ (Morishima, 1995: 636) or speak about an organising logic that is ‘pro-employment’ (Usui and Colignon, 1996: 560). Change might be a necessity but is also constrained by a need for legitimacy and it is within the setting of continued lifetime employment that firms need to adjust their employment practices. The remainder of this paper discusses how they have done so, both within and outside the internal labour market.

CHANGE INSIDE THE INTERNAL LABOUR MARKET: PERFORMANCE-RELATED PAY

Several changes that directly affect the internal labour market have been suggested and introduced in recent years. One important example concerns the development of different employment tracks, in particular a separate track for specialist employees (senmonshoku), to handle various issues like promotion bottlenecks, ambitious young employees, lack of specialist skills, and the need to adjust to a quickly changing environment by hiring skilled employees (Whittaker, 1990). However, actual implementation of the specialist career system has stalled and even seems to have diminished in recent years. For 1999, the figures were about 20 per cent for all firms and about 50 per cent for firms with over 5,000 employees (Nihon Rōdō Kenkyū Kikō, 2003). The case studies confirmed this assessment.

This lack of momentum is particularly striking when compared to another development that has gained wide popularity: the change in evaluation criteria towards performance-related pay. This might appear as a continuation from the past as the importance of ability in the evaluation of employees has slowly increased during previous decades, in particular since the introduction of the ability qualification system. However, while the evaluation of ability is characterised by a similar long-term focus as under seniority wages, recent years have shown a shift towards a short-term evaluation of performance (Rōmu Gyoṣei Kenkyūjo, 2002). This implies that it is no longer the skills an employee has acquired over the long-run but the actual job performance that determines wage. Important, highly related, initiatives in this respect are the introduction of an annual wage system (nenpōsei) and management-by-objectives (mokuhyō kanri seido).

Under nenpōsei, wages are determined on an annual basis by comparing an employee’s performance over the year to certain goals set at the beginning. It usually implies that wages can go down if performance drops. However, its degree of introduction is a topic of debate. Almost 35 per cent of firms had introduced nenpōsei in 2001 (Japan Institute of Labour, 2001; Nihon Rōdō Kenkyū Kikō, 2003) but the number of employees involved was usually limited to the members of certain higher management classes. In comparison, the introduction of management-by-objectives has really taken off. In 2002 almost 70 per cent of firms had already implemented management-by-objectives while another 22.5 per cent was either planning or studying its introduction (Seisansei Rōdō Jōhō Sentà, 2002: 45).

The case studies confirm these findings as all firms in the study have strengthened the importance of performance as a criteria for evaluation in recent years. The reasons given are various, including the rise in the average age of employees, the decrease in promotional positions, and the unbalance that exists under the combination of the traditional ability-based system and the excess of senior employees. However, all these reasons can be summarised under the need to reduce labour costs. Some firms expressed the expectation that performance-related pay might lead to better individual performance or prevent job-hopping by high-quality employees to competitors, but they were an exception. At the same time, the case-studies show a wide diversity in the attempts to strengthen the link between performance and pay. All firms use management-by-objectives but its type and place among the other criteria for evaluation differs, as illustrated by the following list of approaches.

1. ‘Open’ MBO forms. Many firms have introduced forms that enable employees and supervisors to develop the precise criteria for evaluation. This might appear as a continuation from the past as the importance of ability in the evaluation of employees has slowly increased during previous decades, in particular since the introduction of the ability qualification system. However, while the evaluation of ability is characterised by a similar long-term focus as under seniority wages, recent years have shown a shift towards a short-term evaluation of performance (Rōmu Gyoṣei Kenkyūjo, 2002). This implies that it is no longer the skills an employee has acquired over the long-run but the actual job performance that determines wage. Important, highly related, initiatives in this respect are the introduction of an annual wage system (nenpōsei) and management-by-objectives (mokuhyō kanri seido).

2. ‘Closed’ MBO forms. Several firms introduced forms with pre-determined criteria for evaluation. This in case it is crucial to distinguish between different groups of
employees as illustrated by the case-study of one of the retail firms that distinguishes about 60 different classes, based on differences in work and position. In this case, firms also tend to have different forms for measuring ability and performance. At the same time, the differences with ‘open’ MBO forms tend to be gradual as ‘closed’ forms predominantly specify the items and criteria for evaluation but not the actual objectives.

3. Job-based pay. In addition to management-by-objectives, several firms have introduced job-based wages. A good example of job-based pay is provided by one of the firms in electronics, which has rated all jobs on a variety of factors. This rating determines the lower and upper limit of possible wages that a person is entitled to but the actual wages are also determined by ability- and performance-related factors.

4. Competence pay. Another firm in electronics has developed certain ideal types of good performance that formulate the standard conduct for each position and function. As the approach identifies the competencies that are required, it makes it easier to give useful feedback (Lewis, 2001).

These examples show how firms have implemented various strategies in their attempts to make pay dependent upon performance. Moreover, the differences are not limited to these examples. Other differences among the case-study firms include the type of evaluation (self-evaluation, upward appraisals, the number of evaluators), the impact of performance on either bonuses or overall pay, the groups subjected to performance-related evaluation, and the relative impact of performance next to other factors (e.g. ability, seniority, and allowances). All these issues testify of the variety that characterises the trend to performance-related pay. Besides these differences there is also one major similarity as all firms acknowledge the potential problems of performance-related pay (see e.g. Redman, 2001; Bach, 2005). This is understandable as these problems (e.g. conflicts between appraiser and appraised, the lack of equitable rating between employees in different positions) are likely to be particularly serious in a setting where lifetime employment makes an ‘exit-strategy’ very costly. Firms have therefore given elaborate attention to the evaluation process and, as the remainder of this section will show, have tried to find a balance with their existing practices.

Given the changed circumstances the shift to performance-related pay is sensible or inevitable. The ageing population and the lack of positions for promotion make it necessary to tighten the rules for promotion. At the same time, the introduction of performance-related pay can have important implications for the logic of employment practices. Issues that stand out are training, motivation, and possibly long-term commitment. A natural point of departure concerning training is Koike's (1997) claim that pay-for-job and pay-by-result plans cannot be effective in the context of the typical Japanese organisation because ability wages are a necessity for motivating employees to widen their work experience and build sufficient capabilities. All firms in this study have tried to solve this dilemma by limiting performance-related pay to senior employees. Ability and even seniority remain important criteria in the determination of pay for younger employees. Moreover, most firms limit the impact of performance on pay to the bi-annual bonus. This shows that firms are not forced to implement one single payment scheme and the choice as presented by Koike can be considered a simplification.

Concerning motivation it is particularly the ‘career concerns’ that appear to be affected as the shift towards performance-related pay has diminished their relevance, already weakened by the lack of promotional positions, as (future) pay has increasingly become dependent upon performance. At the same time, performance-related pay does not necessarily change the dynamics of employment governance. Career concerns remain important as long as the internal labour market remains relatively closed and pay dependent upon promotion. Under performance-related pay promotion is no longer sufficient but still offers the possibility for high wages during the later phase of a career. However, the room for career concerns is likely to be limited by two developments that have accompanied the trend to performance-related pay. First, several firms have brought forward the moment at which evaluation shifts from seniority to ability or performance in order to bring labour costs in line with actual performance and this has shortened the period during which career concerns are dominant. Secondly, criteria for evaluation have become more explicit and this limits the ‘promotional flexibility’ that enables the firm to adjust the ‘promise’ of promotion to organisational needs. In addition, employees gain a better understanding of their future career possibilities and this is likely to lower overall motivation. This fear was indeed
felt by certain interviewees. Pay-for-performance is obviously the direct alternative to motivate employees but as most firms have mainly focused on the need to reduce labour costs, the danger exists that the employees’ motivation suffers. It also remains to be seen if motivation by performance-related pay can compensate for the possible loss in career concerns.

Thirdly, the rise in performance-related pay could be linked to another development that is often said to take place or to be required: a rise in labour mobility (e.g. Whittaker, 1990; Dore, 1998). The rise in performance-related pay can be expected to contribute to this development as wages become dependent on actual job performance rather than the long-term acquisition of skills. However, the rise in labour mobility is another development that has long been expected but has been slow to materialise in the presence of lifetime employment as a normative principle and a direct outcome of the existing employment practices (Aoki, 1988; Itoh, 1994). Nevertheless, as shown in table 1, a substantial percentage of firms nowadays hire mid-career workers and this could suggest an important change. However, the data remain ambiguous. Table 1 does not indicate the percentage of mid-career employees that firms hire. The percentages of workers who change employment and the data on job tenure provide no indication that the external labour market has achieved or is achieving substantial growth (Nihon Rōdō Kenkyū Kikō, 2003).

In this respect it is interesting to find that several firms in this study employ a substantial number of mid-career employees, albeit relatively young employees or specialists in supportive roles (e.g. accountants). The limited number of cases in this study does not enable us to draw conclusions about the extent of mid-career hiring but the attitude towards mid-career hiring seems to have changed for the positive. At the same time, most firms, some with a system to hire mid-career employees in place, decided not to hire mid-career employees because of an excess of employees; unless they needed some specific kind of speciality or to fill the gaps in the organisation. In addition, it is important to stress that ‘mid-career hiring’ usually concerns employees in their 20s or early 30s. As such, it has been an established practice for employees who join a larger company after a number of successful years at a smaller firm. Moreover, although a few interviewees stressed the need for employability, most consider mid-career hiring as a unique moment in a career and regular employees are still hired for careers rather than specific jobs.

We can now evaluate the changes within the internal labour market. First, in spite of the rhetoric that usually accompanies these adjustments we should not overestimate the changes. This even holds for the introduction of performance-related pay. On a conceptual level, the distinction between ability and performance is often not made very clearly; partly because the differences are gradual as ability tends to be a reflection of past achievements. This is illustrated by the actual changes. A telling example is the aforementioned shift from ability- to job-based pay at one of the firms in electronics. In principle, this shift has major implications as pay is no longer dependent upon a person’s individual ability but on his or her organisational position. However, the job only determines the possible range of wages and the wages are adjusted to personal ability. In the end, there might not be

| TABLE 1: PERCENTAGES OF FIRMS HIRING MID-CAREER WORKERS (2001; MULTIPLE ANSWERS) |
|---------------------------------|----------|-------------|--------------|-------------|
|                                | Management | Clerical | Technical, research | Non-clerical |
| All firms                       | 10.4      | 28.1       | 16.1          | 53.9        |
| > 5,000 employees               | 20.0      | 51.5       | 43.5          | 38.8        |
| 1,000 – 4,999 employees         | 24.2      | 49.2       | 30.3          | 48.8        |
| 300 – 999 employees             | 21.5      | 45.6       | 26.3          | 53.6        |
| 100 – 299 employees             | 16.1      | 37.1       | 21.6          | 59.5        |
| 30 – 99 employees               | 7.3       | 23.2       | 13.0          | 51.0        |

much difference between basing pay on ability with an adjustment for the job performed and basing pay on the job performed with an adjustment for a person’s ability. Another example is provided by one of the firms in electronics which has integrated management-by-objectives in its ability qualification system, thus maintaining ability-based wages while at the same time incorporating performance. Finally, even when the system for evaluation is changed, actual behaviour might not follow immediately or change to a similar extent and some firms admitted that seniority continued to play an informal role.

At the same time, we have seen important changes. We can conclude that the current criteria for evaluation in Japanese firms are varied and often exist in combination and must therefore dismiss the current validity of past presentations of the Japanese pay system which stress seniority as a single basis for evaluation, just like we should be critical towards the rhetoric of seikashugi. It is not just seniority or ability or performance wages but usually a combination of all three, adapted to the position and function of the employee. Rengo, the Japanese Trade Union Confederation, has been one of the few who have acknowledged this and states that seikashugi usually refers to some type of ‘comprehensive job-focused wages’, a certain combination of seniority-focused, job-focused, capacity-focused, and achievement-focused wages (Rengo, 2003). Concerning mid-career hiring, developments have been much more tentative. Change has so far been limited but this might change in the immediate future.

Paradoxically, the importance of lifetime employment is confirmed under difficult economic circumstances when firms use the various strategies available, like the reduction of part-time employment, to refrain from firing regular employees. However, strong economic growth could initiate a trend towards labour mobility when the need for additional employees will show whether firms have truly changed their attitude towards mid-career hiring.

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<th>CHANGE OUTSIDE THE INTERNAL LABOUR MARKET: NON-REGULAR EMPLOYMENT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The changes in recent years have not been limited to the internal labour market. One of the most striking developments, similar to other industrialised nations (Felstead and Jewson, 1999; Auer and Cazes, 2003), is the rise in non-regular employment. This trend originates from the 1970s but has accelerated since the 1990s. It is particularly striking in light of the continuing employment security for regular employees as it means that firms are predominantly limited to replacing these employees by natural attrition.</td>
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Table 2, which also introduces some of the major types of non-regular employment, shows the extent of this rise.

A major initiative to capture, amongst others, the rising importance of non-regular employment has been the introduction of a ‘multi-track employment system’ by the employers’ association Nikkeiren (Nikkeiren, 1995, 1996). It proposes an organisation of the corporate ‘employment portfolio’ in three groups of employees: (1) a core or ‘elite’ group of long-term employees, (2) a

<table>
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<th>TABLE 2: PERCENTAGES OF EMPLOYEES BY TYPE OF EMPLOYMENT</th>
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<tr>
<td>Regular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-timers¹</td>
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<td>Anubaito²</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

¹ Workers whose scheduled working hours are less than those of regular employees in the same workplace. Usually 35 hours a week is taken as the dividing line in this respect (Araki, 2002). However, many part-timers (so-called ‘pseudo-part-timers’) work about the same number of hours as full-time employees, usually defined as those working more than 35 hours.

² A job taken by someone still in school or with other reasons to work a small number of hours.

Source: Japan Institute of Labour (2002b, 2004b, 2006)
group of specialists for dealing with specific problems, and (3) a peripheral group for simple routine tasks. Each group has its own type of employment contracts and rules for promotion, remuneration, training, etc. Table 3 gives an overview of their typical characteristics. Besides the aforementioned development of a specific employment track for specialist employees, the employment portfolio focuses in particular on the (numerical) flexibility provided by non-regular employment. As such, it shows strong similarities to both the model of the ‘flexible firm’ (Atkinson and Meager, 1986; Atkinson, 1987) and theories of labour market dualism (e.g. Doeringer and Piore, 1971; Berger and Piore, 1980). It also corresponds to the traditional role ascribed to non-regular employment in Japan as an ‘employment buffer’ to protect the lifetime employment of regular employees (Rohlen, 1979; Usui and Colignon, 1996).

However, the situation might not be as straightforward as these interpretations suggest. A large group of part-time employees in Japan actually holds relatively stable employment. The majority has a contract without a fixed term and even those with fixed-term contracts often have relatively stable employment because of repeated contract extensions (Kezuka, 2001). This has important consequences because Japanese case law interprets a repeated extension of contracts, or even a reasonable expectation of continued employment, as sufficient to treat a refusal of renewal as dismissal and thus amenable to the case law concerning proper dismissal. Passet (2003) therefore refers to part-time workers with repeated contract renewals as ‘quasi-regular employees’. This means that part-time employment offers relatively little advantage in numerical flexibility, albeit that its stability will always be second-rate to that of regular employment. Instead, lower labour costs appear of crucial importance. Research by the Japan Institute of Labour shows the ‘need to control labour costs’ as the overriding reason for hiring part-time employees (Japanese Institute of Labour, 2004a). This importance is underlined by the widened differences in pay between regular and non-regular employees during the 1990s. The hourly payment for part-time workers compared to that of regular workers diminished from 70.9 to 65.7 per cent for women and from 55.4 to 49.9 per cent for men between 1989 and 2003 (Nihon Rōdō Kenkyū Kikō, 2005), a trend going back even further than the 1990s (Kezuka, 2001). In accordance, the use of part-time employees has changed from pro- to counter-cyclical in recent years (Passet, 2003). Instead of using non-regular employment as a buffer, firms have actually increased non-regular employment to reduce labour costs. The issue of flexibility remains important (e.g. the need for ‘additional personnel on a daily or weekly basis’ is the second-most mentioned reason for hiring arubaito) but this

<table>
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<th>Type of employment</th>
<th>Employees eligible</th>
<th>Wages</th>
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<th>Basis for promotion</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Core group of long-term employees (A)</td>
<td>Open-ended employment contract</td>
<td>Managerial career track, core-technical occupations</td>
<td>Monthly salary or yearly remuneration package; ability-based wages; wage increment</td>
<td>Specified rate and sliding scale for performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialists (B)</td>
<td>Fixed-term employment contract</td>
<td>Specialist occupations (planning, sales, R&amp;D, etc.)</td>
<td>Yearly remuneration package; performance wages; no wage increment</td>
<td>Sharing of company performance results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible workforce (C)</td>
<td>Fixed-term employment contract</td>
<td>Clerical, technical, sales positions</td>
<td>Hourly wages; Job-based wages; no wage increment</td>
<td>Specified rate</td>
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Source: Japan Business Federation (2003: 38)
importance is of secondary order (Japanese Institute of Labour, 2004a). The case-studies confirm the dominant importance of costs. All firms - to a larger or lesser extent - have tried to replace regular by non-regular employment to reduce labour costs in response to the difficult economic circumstances. In particular the jobs within the so-called ‘general’ employment track (ippanshoku), an ‘auxiliary’ track for relatively unskilled employees in a supporting role and without many chances for promotion, are increasingly taken by non-regular (dispatched) workers.

Moreover, the story takes another twist if we include the inter-industry differences in non-regular employment. Most striking are the developments among the case-studies in the retail and restaurant industries. These industries have made extensive use of non-regular employment ever since they achieved strong growth from the 1970s. In the first quarter of 2004, 44.3 per cent and 63.4 per cent of employees in respectively the retail and restaurant/hotel industries were non-regular, against only 17.7 percent and 21.4 per cent in construction and manufacturing (Japan Institute of Labour, 2004b). An interesting aspect of the retail and restaurant/hotel industries is that the distinction between regular and non-regular employees does not necessarily coincide with the one between core and peripheral employees. Gadrey et al. (2001: 175) describe how part-timers are sometimes considered to be part of the core workforce, albeit as ‘permanent employees with inferior occupational status (and pay)’. In these cases, the qualification as part-time employee is thus according to status rather than functionality. This was confirmed by the case-studies as the firms - two major retailers and one restaurant chain - had not only increased the use of part-timers but had also extended their responsibilities and career opportunities. One major retailer had established sales sections that are managed exclusively by part-time employees and planned to extend these initiatives because of positive results. Accordingly, a part-time employee can achieve higher hierarchical positions and, at least in theory, become store manager. The other firms showed similar initiatives with the changes at the restaurant operator even more far-reaching. Besides increasing the percentage of part-time employees to about 90 per cent, the firm introduced a single ability qualification system for all employees. Part-timers can now become manager and employees can even switch between a regular and part-time contract. At the same time, it will be obvious that most part-time employees are not interested in having a ‘regular’ career as they are not willing or capable to invest the necessary time and energy. It was estimated that about 10 per cent of part-time employees were interested in the extended career possibilities (Keizer, 2005).

In comparison, the role of non-regular employment in the other industries is more limited. To a considerable extent this can be understood from the contingencies that hold for the organisation of work in the ‘J-firm’. For instance, in the automobile industry the employment and wider organisational practices have hardly been questioned. All the firms stressed the importance of vague and flexible job descriptions, intentional overlap between jobs, and job rotation. In accordance, regular employment remains crucial and there is a relative absence of non-regular employment. Electronics is another industry that used to fulfil all contingencies and whose success has depended on the typical Japanese organisational and employment practices. However, the electronics industry has achieved important progress in standardisation and modularisation and this enables a more extended involvement of non-regular employment, which has come to constitute a substantial share of employment (e.g. 25 per cent) at certain firms. Finally, construction presents yet another situation concerning non-regular employment. The employment practices in this industry can be considered ‘traditional’ and firms stressed the importance of ambiguous job descriptions and overlap between jobs. However, confronted with very difficult market circumstances, firms have tried to reduce labour costs; not by hiring more non-regular employees but by increased hiring at the regional level. If of sufficient ability, these employees are offered an open contract with lifetime employment but their status as branch employees continues to offer cost advantages to the firm.

We can draw various conclusions on the role of non-regular employment in the Japanese labour market. First, its rising importance underlines an essential role and it should be treated accordingly. However, contradictory to the various perspectives available - the model of the ‘flexible firm’, dual labour market theory, Nikkeiren’s employment portfolio - the advantage most cherished is not flexibility but cost. The future will tell to what extent this is related to the specific economic circumstances of the lost decade which, beyond the initial ‘burst of the bubble’, has been
characterised by a continuing weak economy rather than fluctuations in demand. Secondly, we see important inter-industry differences in the quantity and types of non-regular employment. This is important because it suggests that the rise in non-regular employment might not reflect an economy-wide management strategy to replace regular by non-regular employment, as suggested by both the model of the ‘flexible firm’ and the Nikkeiren employment portfolio, but rather a reflection of sector changes. Finally, there is an interesting aspect to the duality or segmentation between regular and non-regular employment. On the one hand, the distinction between regular and non-regular employment is too simple, as illustrated by the extended career possibilities for part-time employees in retail and the secondary internal labour market for regional employees in construction. On the other hand, the duality, to some extent supported by a preference for non-regular employment among certain social groups like married women and students (Gadrey et al., 2001), remains essential. It is precisely this duality, and the large group of potential non-regular employment that it creates, which has enabled firms to reduce labour costs by replacing regular by non-regular employees. It allows the firms to uphold the internal labour market for a (smaller) group of core employees and the rise in non-regular employment, and the underlying segmentation, can therefore be said to uphold the viability of this market.

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND WIDER IMPLICATIONS

The current adjustments in Japanese employment practices have been inspired by the difficult economic circumstances of the ‘lost decade’ rather than long-term developments like a shortage of young employees and a changing position for female employees. Employment has clearly been on the receiving end of the economic difficulties, having to carry the burden of the lack of growth, and the necessity to reduce labour costs has been behind the two major adjustments in employment practices: the rise in non-regular labour and performance-related pay. Both affect the internal labour market that has long been the key feature of Japanese human resource management. The rise in non-regular employment has diminished its size while the introduction of performance-related pay has actually led to a variety in evaluation criteria, resulting in a new diversity in Japanese employment practices. In this respect, Japan has come a long way since Abegglen’s (1958: 68) initial assessment that ‘the whole system of job evaluation’ had no place in the Japanese firm because it would clash with the existing practices based on the relationship of ‘lifetime commitment’.

At the same time, the new constellation remains highly specific to Japan with lifetime employment as the core of Japanese employment practices. Employees and firms may have lost the conviction that employment is really guaranteed in the long term but without an alternative, the support for lifetime employment remains strong and determines the legitimacy and direction of adjustments. The continued support means that firms have been forced to change the rules of the internal labour market - in particular through a shift towards performance-related pay - rather than question its existence. Crucial is also the continued duality of the labour market as both the internal labour market and the cost advantages offered by non-regular employment are dependent upon this segmentation. It contributes to the strong labour costs advantages that non-regular employment offers and thus enables firms to control overall labour costs by hiring more non-regular employees. As a consequence, the flexibility in employment practices has been surprisingly large with firms making rather substantial adjustments while, at the same time, upholding the conventional employment logic based on internal labour markets and long-term employment relations.

In spite of its specific character, the value of these findings remains not limited to the Japanese situation. As indicated before, many of the issues are similar to those in other countries. Examples include the trend towards performance-related pay and the difficulties involved (see e.g. Redman, 2001; Bach, 2005), the rise in non-regular employment (see e.g. Felstead and Jewson, 1999; Auer and Cazes, 2003), and the difficult position of non-regular employees in a segmented labour market (see e.g. Walsh, 1999). The developments in the Japanese labour market and the initiatives of Japanese firms, quickened by the difficult economic circumstances of the ‘lost decade’, can be inspirational for the study of these issues in other countries. In addition, the paper suggests certain theoretical insights that can strengthen our analysis of labour markets. First of all, the analysis has illustrated the rich segmentation that is possible; with not just the fundamental duality between regular and non-regular employment but further distinctions, including secondary tracks within the internal labour market and improved career opportunities for (certain) part-time employees. It is striking that the basic duality is
essential but nevertheless allows for various labour markets at either side of the duality. Moreover, as the example of the restaurant chain shows, some mobility across the duality appears possible as long as its actual existence is not questioned. In this respect the findings are comparable to the segmented, four-cornered system as developed by Pérez-Díaz and Rodríguez (1995) to analyse the Spanish labour market in terms of a core and various alternative labour markets. As in their analysis, the Japanese sub-markets are strongly shaped by the existing national institutions and practices and dependent upon social support for their stability. The labour market shows a diversity of labour market arrangements, a diversity that tends to be ignored in approaches like those of the flexible firm and dual labour markets. Instead we have, for instance, seen that costs might be as important as flexibility, that important differences exist between industries, and that national institutions strongly influence the rules of the internal labour market and the overall dynamics of employment practices.
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