



## 1. Special Essay:

Human Resource  
Departments in  
Japanese MNEs:  
Exploring the Black Box

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# Human Resource Departments in Japanese MNEs: Exploring the Black Box

## 2. Special Essay:

Do Domestic R&D  
Activities Impact Those  
Overseas?: Analysis of  
Productivity Changes  
and Globalization in  
Japan's Manufacturing  
Industry

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This article reports on our recent research on the roles and challenges of human resource departments in Japan's large corporations. While we are still in the process of publishing our results, we report here shortly on our research motivation and research framework and present some preliminary findings.

## Research Motivation

We came to this research topic after conducting a study on the recruitment of non-Japanese fresh university graduates into the headquarters of Japanese corporations. As both of us are teaching at universities outside of Japan, we were surprised to see an increasing trend of our graduates being recruited not only into Japanese companies in Britain or Singapore, but also increasingly into headquarters in Japan. We thought that researching this trend was not only an opportunity to look at changes in human resource management in Japan, but would also enable us to advise and prepare our students better for work in Japanese companies. We

thus conducted an interview study with young non-Japanese employees working for Japanese corporations in Japan, the HR sections of Japanese companies and finally the agents involved in the actual recruitment processes (Conrad and Meyer-Ohle 2019; Conrad and Meyer-Ohle, forthcoming 2020). Talking to representatives of HR sections, we realized that we had quite a good understanding of the HR policies and practices of Japanese corporations, but were clearly lacking an understanding of the roles and capabilities of HR departments. For example, we had assumed that being in charge of recruitment and being involved in the allocation and rotation of employees, HR departments would carry some weight of their own in Japanese corporations. However, we found HR departments facing resistance when placing international recruits into operational units to fulfil requests by board members. We also sensed that some HR policies of companies were not probably implemented, with our informants regarding their work in human resources rather as a transitional period than a long-term professional career. We therefore set out to understand better the position and

roles of Japanese HR departments through an explorative interview study with HR representatives of 37 mostly large, established Japanese MNCs.

## Previous Research on HR Departments in Japanese Companies

Previous research on HR departments of large Japanese companies has largely attributed to them a more important role than that of their counterparts in Western corporations. While in Western corporations HR sections have been seen as just another administrative support function, HR sections in Japanese corporations have been described as controlling the vital allocation and rotation of employees, necessary within an employment system that is built on the assumption of long-term employment. Aoki (1990) describes this situation in his influential article *Toward an Economic Model of the Japanese Firm* as follows:

*In order to administer rank hierarchies, Japanese firms have developed the personnel department as an important institution. This department has full control of the recruitment of new employees for career tracks out of school, designs and runs rank hierarchies (pay scale and promotion criteria), and rotates white-collar workers with an eye to the wider interests of the organization... Since the personnel department potentially has excessive power because of its control of promotion and rotation, managers of the department are usually themselves subject to rotation. (12/13)*

Yet, Nonaka, another influential scholar on Japanese management, as early as 1988 questioned this assumption:

*The personnel department of Japanese companies, in general, used to be a more strategic section when compared with that of typical Western companies. Personnel and financial management are relatively*

*centralized in Japanese companies, and there are considerable numbers of top executives who have developed their careers chiefly in the personnel department. In recent years, however, the tasks of the personnel department have become limited to more routine activities (such as the recruitment of new graduates, payroll-related activities, employee benefits and welfare, and labor relations) as the corporate organization has become more bureaucratic due to expansion in size. (58)*

Consequently, Nonaka proposed that human resource departments should reassert their importance by playing a strategic role in what would have been a drastic overhaul of the way human resources were to be managed in Japan. His propositions included a rejuvenation of decision makers, diversification of career paths, individualization of incentive systems, decentralization of personnel movement and heterogeneous staffing through mid-career hiring, as well as the development of foreign staff. Nonaka's proposal was derived from the aggregation of singular progressive initiatives of certain companies. Yet, the fact that 30 years later all of these issues are still the focus of a lively debate with regards to their appropriateness to Japan underlines the stability of the original institutions of the so-called Japanese human resource management system. While Nonaka in 1988 mainly related his call for "revitalized" human resource departments to the needs of companies to nurture creativity and build international operations, HR departments regained some of their importance by default during the 1990s after the Japanese economy had entered into a period of stagnation and many companies faced the need to restructure labour forces through large scale early retirement programs. Companies also began to experiment with new incentive systems (Conrad 2010; 2011) or the employment of non-regular employees, often under the pressure to reduce labour costs (Meyer-Ohle 2009). Jacoby et al. (2005) provide an overview of the role of the HR

department in the past and hypothesize for Japanese firms that they have lost some of their power due to a shift of governance away from employees as stakeholders toward the interest of shareholders. Finding some evidence for change in this direction, they still concluded that change in Japan has been relatively slower than in the US with differences becoming even larger.

*In Japan, the HR function's power rests inside the organization: on career employment practices, the centralization of operating decisions, and on dealings with the enterprise union. Executives are somewhat more inclined to see employees as ends, that is, as stakeholders or as competitive resources. In short, we have a paradox: both Japanese and U.S. firms are becoming more market-oriented yet national differences persist and may even be widening.* (Jacoby et al. 2005: 238)

Hirano (2013) also looks at the role of HR departments and, based on a large survey, concludes that the role of HR departments for managerial employees as well as towards other functions in the company has changed little since the high growth period. HR departments are found to remain important and contributing to companies through their accumulation of and control over personal information, their involvement in the transfer dynamic of employees, and the training of employees across functions.

In conclusion, there has been some research on the institutional role of the HR function in Japanese firms, yet much of this research has focussed on the reasons for its continued relative institutional importance. Overall, the literature has focussed on the important role of the HR function in the Japanese firm in facilitating the long-term development of personnel, yet it has little to say about its role in initiating change or supporting larger corporate strategic objectives. This is why we set out to investigate the latter issues in more detail.

We are still in the process of analysing our findings and interpreting them within an institutional theory framework, yet, we would like to highlight here the following points for an early discussion in this forum.

## **Towards a Strategic HR Management in Japanese MNCs?**

We found a significant interest among our informants in developing human resource management in Japan into a professional function that can participate in the strategic development of the company, especially with the perspective to manage global labour forces and discover, develop, allocate and retain talent throughout organizations. Our interviewees highlighted the significant efforts of Japanese MNCs to grow overseas operations, with some companies having made substantial overseas acquisitions, yet also admitted that the integration of HR policies was often lagging behind. Our interviewees also reported pressure from board members to contribute more strategically, but also highlighted the need of HR departments to reinvent themselves after losing some of their influence due to the automation and outsourcing of administrative tasks. In addition, increasingly independent business units are claiming more independence in HR decisions, partly circumventing the HR departments by resorting to mid-career hiring, with HR departments themselves normally focussing only on the recruitment of fresh graduates.

## **Following the US Model?**

In looking for inspiration for changing the role of HR departments, Ulrich's model of HR professionalism has clearly gained significant popularity in Japan. His books have been translated into Japanese and influential institutions such as the Japan Management Association have introduced development courses for HR managers and are thus pushing the ideal of a professional HR manager. This HR professional has a set of individual abilities, deep

HR skills combined with an understanding of business operations beyond the realms of human resource management and follows the mission to align HR activities with objectives set by corporate leadership. This enables HR professionals to not just support but to engage on eye-level as a partner with other business functions (Ulrich and Dulebohn, 2015).

However, while our company informants were well aware of the above discourse, their answers on the future of human resources and the “ideal HR manager” in their companies in particular and in Japan more generally were still very much grounded within the existing thinking on employment structures and employee development in Japan. First, we found a very strong continued commitment to the ideal of understanding the so-called “*genba*” as the place where goods and services are developed, produced and sold on a day to day basis. While dealing with unions seems to have lost somewhat in importance, most informants still see future HR managers starting their career in the *genba* and seem to value this exposure much higher than any possible education in HR prior to the entry in companies. Exposure on this level seems to be what provides HR managers with the necessary legitimacy and skills to communicate and align policies and to negotiate employee transfers, possibly even more so than previously, as business functions have gained some independence in HR matters.

Being ourselves influenced by the discourse on the HR professional, we asked our informants for the traits and qualifications of the “ideal HR employee”. However, most of our informants would instead describe the “ideal HR department”. Here, they see the HR department being composed of a mix of people with proper technical HR skills, possibly also gained through further education, overseas exposure or in other companies, and people who have a deep understanding of and links to the operational functions, while possibly only

working temporarily in human resources. Additionally, our informants did not necessarily see the need for HR department leaders to have a strong background in HR, but instead saw leadership qualities and the ability to institute change as more important. Here, it can be argued that these perceptions of the ideal state of HR management might mostly reflect the realities of Japanese corporations and particularly the experience of our own informants, with many not having spent all their careers in HR and very differing levels of HR specialization. A call for professionals might thus question their own careers and legitimacy in occupying HR leadership positions.

However, these answers can also be seen as reflecting an opportunity that arises from career paths and job descriptions in Japanese corporations being more open and less specific. The Western discourse on the development and external and internal recognition of HR as a profession has admitted to one major hurdle, namely straddling the needs of developing individuals that have both a deep HR specialization and an understanding of the operational

*“Japanese companies have, based on their organisational characteristics, the opportunity to come up with what could be termed “professional HR departments” rather than individual “HR professionals”*

and strategic needs of the business functions (Lemmergaard 2009; Jamieson, Eklund, and Meekin 2012; Cohen 2015). Within the Western system of frequent employer changes within one specialisation, it seems to be very difficult to overcome this hurdle. However, the longer tenure of employees in Japanese companies and assigning tasks more broadly to departments and sections rather than specifically to individuals seems indeed to allow for a combination of people of different backgrounds, skills and



abilities. Currently, the composition of many HR departments and the development of HR staff does seem to reflect some elements of randomness. Yet, if conceptualised properly, Japanese companies have, based on their organisational characteristics, the opportunity to come up with what could be termed “professional HR departments” rather than individual “HR professionals”. These would then indeed be able to overcome the hurdle of HR as a profession, as it has been described in the literature.

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## Special Essay:

# Do Domestic R&D Activities Impact Those Overseas?: Analysis of Productivity Changes and Globalization in Japan's Manufacturing Industry

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### Introduction

Japanese business enterprises reported a significant decline in R&D expenditures following the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008. According to the *Survey of Research and Development* conducted by the *Statistics Bureau of Japan*, R&D expenditure recovered to pre-crisis levels in FY 2019 and has reached 14,232 billion yen. However, concerns about the expenditure levels have recently re-emerged because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. During April–June 2020, the preliminary real GDP figures decreased by an annualized 27.8% from the previous quarter, which is the largest drop since 1955, when GDP statistics were made available in Japan. In addition to Japan, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany report a significant decline in their GDP levels. To survive this economic downturn, Japanese companies are exploring new ways to improve productivity while utilizing limited resources and rare opportunities. One such solution is an integrated system of manufacturing and sales that leverages data and digital technology, also known as digital transformation (DX).

With the objective of exploring the first step to sales and production, R&D activities, this study conducts an R&D productivity analysis on Japan's manufacturing industry. The results can help understand not only domestic but also overseas R&D activities since increased productivity in local R&D

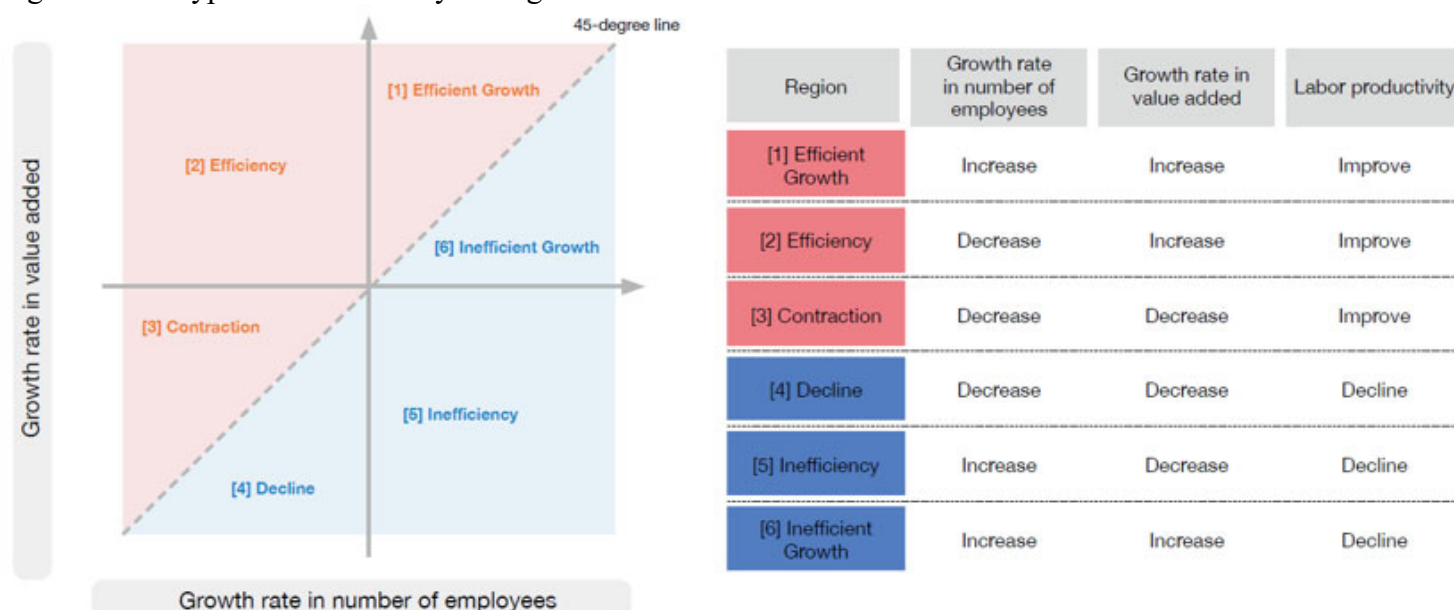
activities can positively affect those overseas. The research also highlights global innovation in the Japanese manufacturing industry.

### Definition of Keywords

This section presents the definitions for research and productivity, the two keywords employed in this study. The *Statistics Bureau of Japan* defines research as the creative acquisition of new knowledge and innovative use of existing knowledge. Our study analyzes R&D productivity using intramural R&D expenditure data that have been annually published since 1987 in the *Survey of Research and Development* by the *Statistics Bureau of Japan*. The data include labor costs, materials, expenditures on tangible and intangible fixed assets, lease fees, and other expenses.

The *Japan Productivity Center* describes productivity as the degree to which production factors are effectively utilized. Labor productivity per capita, for example, is estimated by dividing value added by the number of employees. Under this concept, productivity can be improved by increasing output while leaving inputs unchanged, decreasing input while keeping output constant, or diminishing input while expanding output. Japanese companies are accelerating DX adoption, given the potential to save labor costs and other expenses.

Figure 1. Six Types of Productivity Changes



Source: National Association of Small and Medium Enterprise Promotion Organizations (2018, p.62).

## Classification of Productivity change

This study focuses on labor productivity to estimate R&D productivity in the Japanese manufacturing industry. The *2018 White Paper on Small and Medium Enterprises in Japan* guides the research perspective and serves as a reference for changes in labor productivity. We adopt a method developed by Accenture Japan Ltd. to analyze the growth rate of labor, which is the growth rate in value added divided by that in the number of employees. Figure 1 illustrates the six classifications of productivity changes.

The figure shows that efficient growth, for example, improves both labor productivity the number of employees and, thus, can be considered to promote corporate growth. Inefficient growth, on the other hand, decreases labor productivity and does not create value added associated with an increase in employees. Thus, the classification method transcends the simple viewpoint that a positive growth rate for labor productivity denotes improvements, while a negative growth rate means

deterioration. The method also allows us to explore the process of arriving at each result.

## Value added in R&D

While this study adopts the above mentioned classification method to examine changes in the R&D productivity of the Japanese manufacturing industry, it replaces the number of employees with the number of persons employed in R&D. However, such a straightforward substitution cannot be applied to value added. The output of R&D activities is generally denoted by the number of patent applications and publication citations. However, these indicators are difficult to evaluate in monetary terms.

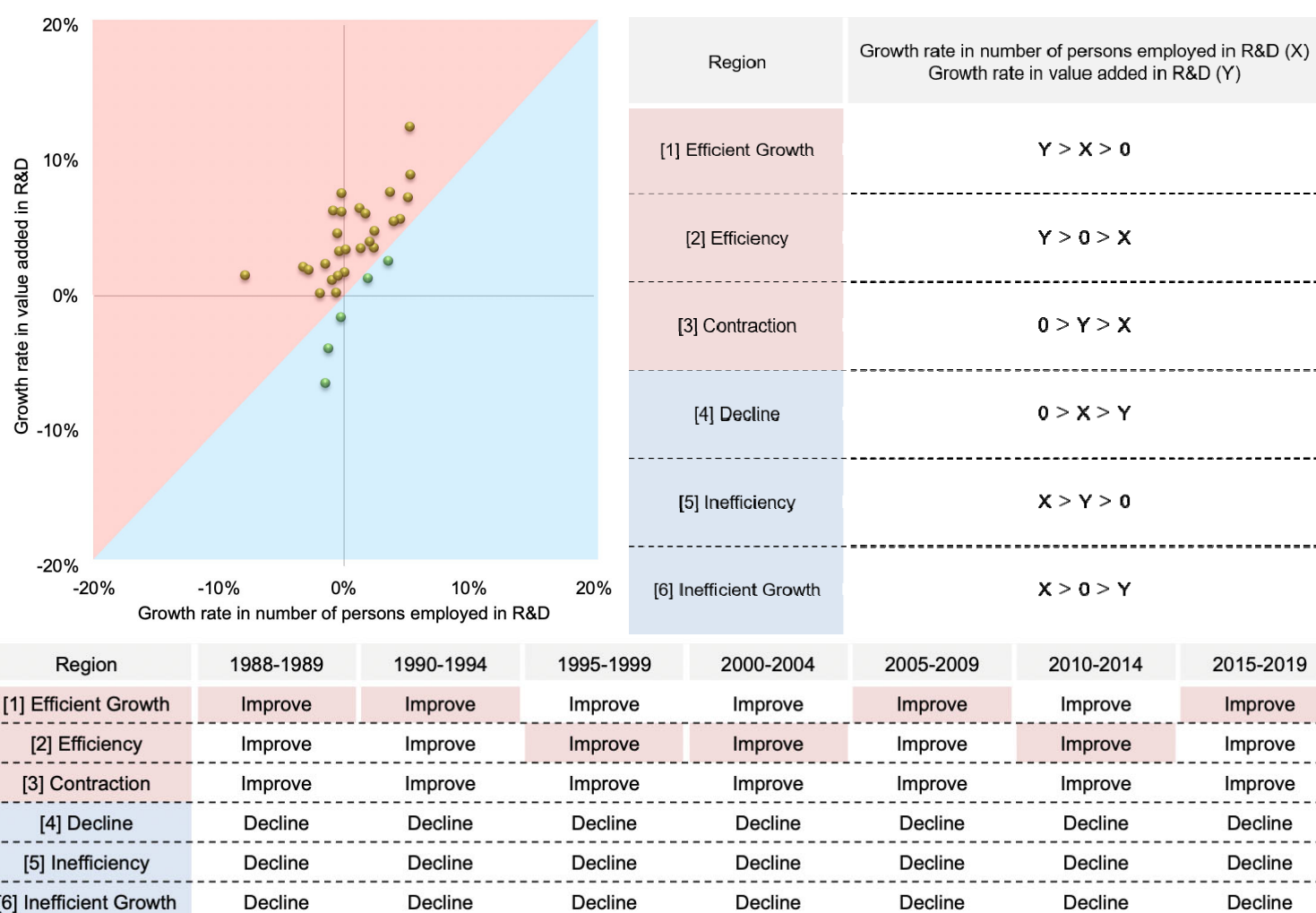
Therefore, this study calculates value added in R&D using data from the *Survey of Research and Development* by the *Statistics Bureau of Japan* for the technology balance of payments<sup>1</sup>, labor costs, and the depreciation of tangible fixed assets in R&D. We replace these indicators with operating profit, labor costs, and depreciation costs<sup>2</sup>. Once we determined the

1 The technology balance of payments is estimated as receipts from technology exports minus technology payments.

2 Value added in R&D is the sum of the technology balance of payments, labor costs, and the depreciation of tangible fixed assets.

3 Following is the formula to estimate the growth rate in value added: labor share  $\times$  the growth rate for labor costs  $+ (1 - \text{labor share}) \times$  the growth rate for tangible and intangible fixed assets  $+ \text{the growth rate for TFP}$ .

Figure 2. Productivity Changes in R&amp;D



Source: Author.

appropriate calculation approach for value added, it became possible to identify the contribution of each production factor to the growth rate of value added<sup>3</sup>.

## R&D productivity analysis for Japan's manufacturing industry

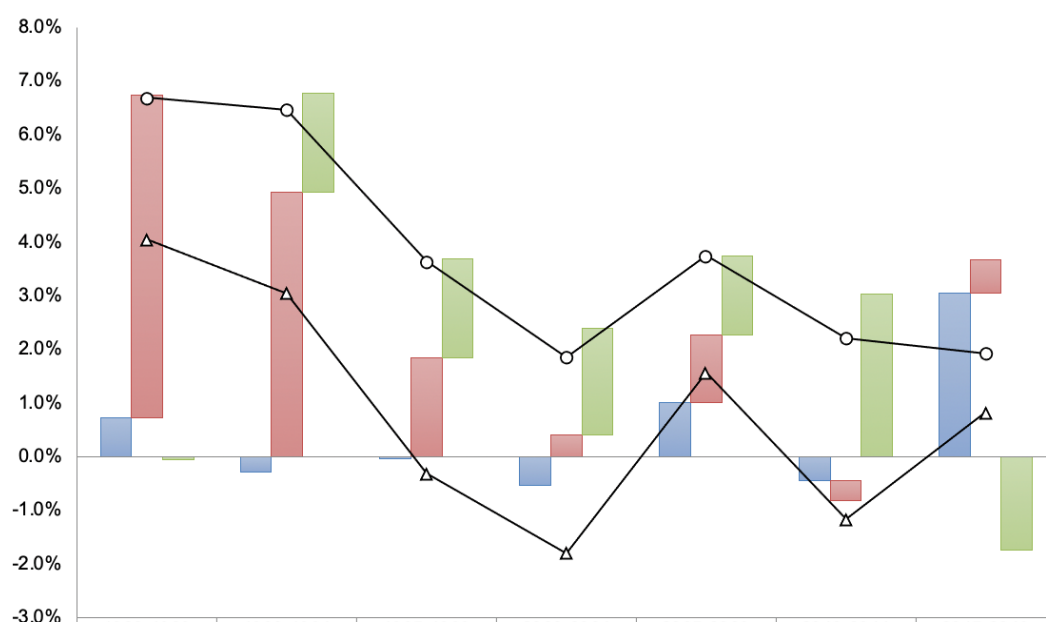
Figure 2 presents the analysis results for productivity changes in R&D. Changes in productivity are confirmed between the regions of efficient growth and efficiency. The analysis also reports improvements in labor productivity. In other words, Japan's manufacturing industry shows sound growth in its R&D activities. By contrast, Figure 3 suggests that improvements in labor productivity in the context of R&D are associated with a decrease in the growth rate for

value added in R&D and a further decline in that for the number of persons employed in R&D. Thus, we see a contractionary trend for the growth rate of value added in R&D and the contribution of labor input, and this is consistent with the downward trend observed for the growth rate of the number of persons employed in R&D. These findings highlight the substitution of labor with capital in the R&D activities of the Japanese manufacturing industry.

To this effect, Takenaka (1984) describes R&D activities in the Japanese manufacturing industry as capital intensive and large scale considering the increasing investments in labor-saving technologies and rationalization. This viewpoint can be substantiated with the conclusions of the *Survey of Research and*



Figure 3. Factor Decomposition for Productivity Changes in R&amp;D

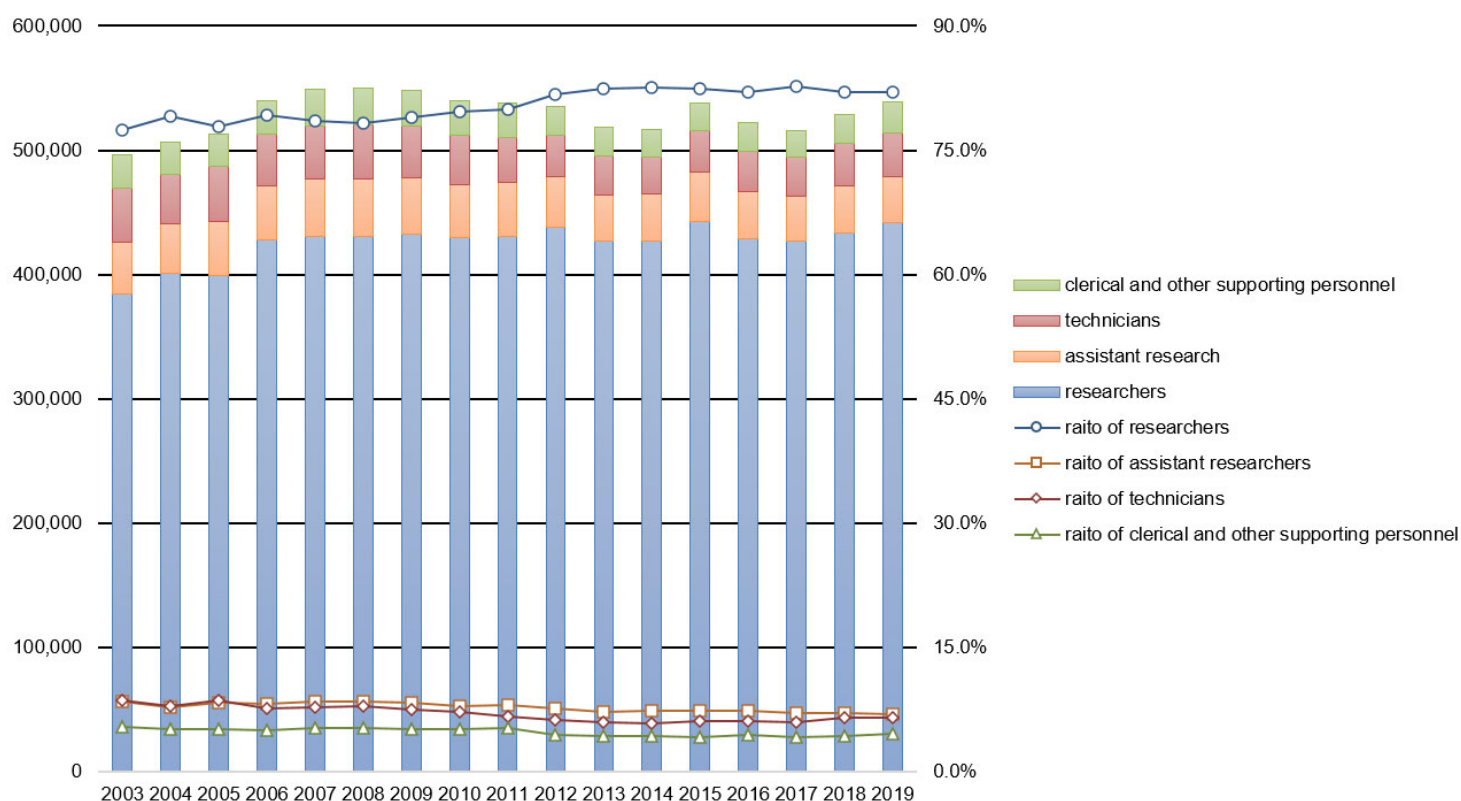


	1988-1989	1990-1994	1995-1999	2000-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2015-2019
Contribution of TFP	-0.05%	1.83%	1.83%	1.99%	1.47%	3.02%	-1.74%
Contribution of labor input	6.02%	4.93%	1.85%	0.41%	1.25%	-0.36%	0.63%
Contribution of capital input	0.72%	-0.29%	-0.04%	-0.54%	1.01%	-0.45%	3.04%
Growth rate in number of persons employed in R&D	4.05%	3.05%	-0.32%	-1.80%	1.57%	-1.16%	0.82%
Growth rate in value added in R&D	6.69%	6.47%	3.64%	1.85%	3.74%	2.21%	1.93%

Region	1988-1989		1990-1994		1995-1999		2000-2004		2005-2009		2010-2014		2015-2019	
[1] Efficient Growth	−0.22				🔍 Growth rate in value added in R&D									
	−1.01	−1.09	+1.99		🔍 Contribution of capital input, contribution of labor input, contribution of TFP									
	−1.00				🔍 Growth rate in number of persons employed in R&D									
[2] Efficiency	−2.83													
	+0.26		−3.08	−0.004										
	−3.37													
[2] Efficiency	−1.78													
	−0.50		−1.14	+0.16										
	−1.46													
[1] Efficient Growth	+1.89													
	+1.55		+0.85	−0.52										
	+3.37													
[2] Efficiency	−1.54													
	−1.47		−1.62	+1.55										
	−2.73													
[1] Efficient Growth	−0.28													
	+3.49		+0.99	−4.76										
	+1.99													

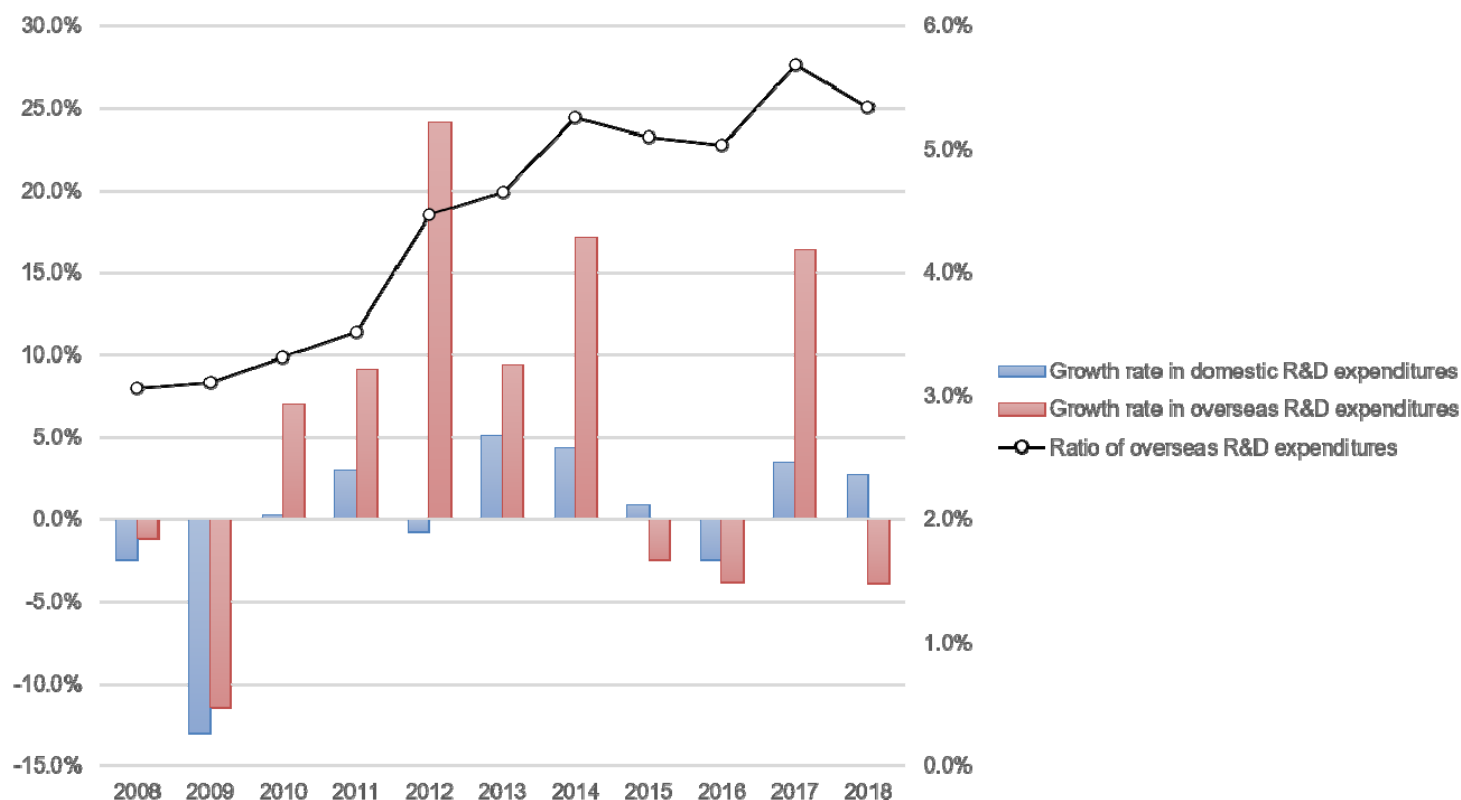
Source: Author.

Figure 4. Distribution of Four Types of Employees in R&amp;D



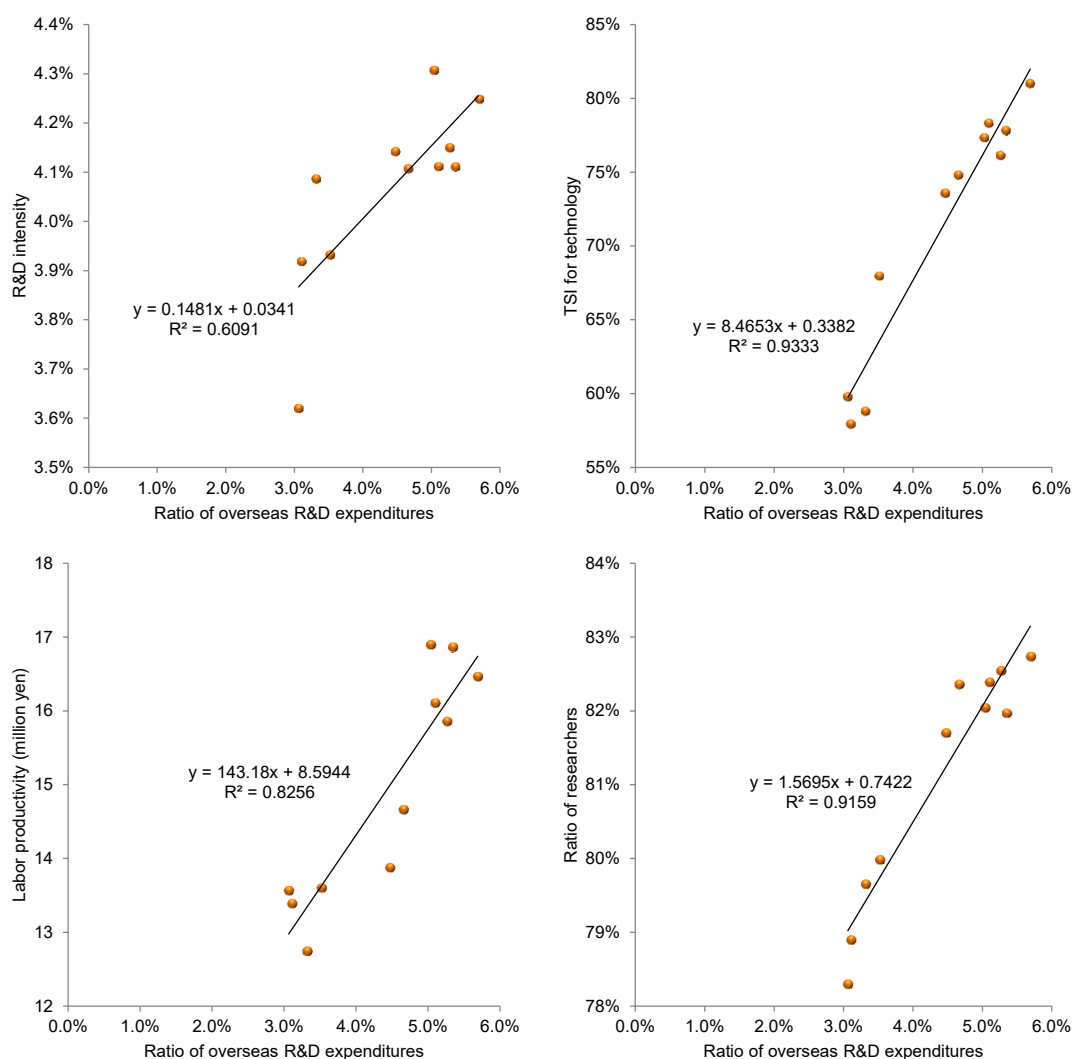
Source: Survey of Research and Development, Statistics Bureau of Japan

Figure 5. Trend for Overseas R&amp;D Expenditures in the Japanese Manufacturing Industry



Source: Survey on Overseas Business Activities in Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry, Japan.

Figure 6. Relationship between Improvements in Domestic R&D Activities and Ratio of Overseas R&D Expenditures



Source: Author.

*Development* conducted by the *Statistics Bureau of Japan*. Labor costs related to value added in R&D steadily declined from more than 80% in 1990 to 76% in 2000, 66% in 2010, and 54% in 2019. This study further confirms the substitution of labor with capital in R&D activities.

## Conclusions and implications

Some scholars have attributed declining employment to the introduction of information and communication technologies (ICT), whereas some others believe ICT complements a rise in employment. A majority of micro-level studies in advanced countries confirm the complementarity between technology and skills in improving the

performance of productivity. OECD (2003), for example, reports that computers as a skill-biased technology increase the demand for skilled workers but reduces that of unskilled workers. Similarly, the *2009 White Paper on Information and Communications in Japan* highlights that ICT capital complements highly skilled labor but renders low-skilled labor substitutable in both the manufacturing and service industries. This study focuses on researchers performing high-skilled labor among four types of employees in R&D. The results confirm that, in recent years, there has been a steady increase in the ratio of researchers to the overall number of employees (see Figure 4). In other words, labor productivity in R&D is gradually

entering a recessionary phase. The rationalization of R&D, however, is progressing and complements highly skilled labor. The conclusions of this study have some implications for overseas R&D activities associated with the Japanese manufacturing industry.

The *Survey on Overseas Business Activities* conducted by Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry reports a recent upward trend in the ratio of overseas R&D expenditures to overall R&D (total domestic R&D expenditures in Japan and overseas R&D) in the Japanese manufacturing industry (Figure 5). Such progress in overseas R&D activities can be viewed as an extension of advancements in domestic R&D activities. Figure 6 shows that R&D intensity, the trade specification index (TSI) for technology, labor productivity, and the ratio of researchers are associated with the ratio of overseas R&D expenditures in the manufacturing industry.

In conclusion, improved productivity in domestic R&D activities may positively affect overseas R&D activities. Nevertheless, further analysis is needed to confirm this finding.

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