

The Informal Structure of Senpai (Seniors), Kohai (Juniors), and Doki (Peers) in Japanese Organizations

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In Japanese organizations, those who join earlier are called *senpai* (seniors), those who join later are *kohai* (juniors), and those who join in the same year are called *doki* (peers). The relationships among senpai, kohai, and doki function as an informal hierarchical structure working in tandem with the formal job-based organizational hierarchy. These relationships are deeply rooted in unique Japanese concepts, such as *ba*, the Confucian cultural tradition that influenced the formation of Japanese society, and the historical background of large organizations in modern Japan. Specifically, the seamless school-to-work transition due to the batch hiring of new graduates every April creates a similar hierarchical structure to that of senpai, kohai, and dokyusei (classmates) in schools. The balance between the formal job-based hierarchy and informal seniority-based (senpai–kohai–doki) hierarchy has been the base of the stable and harmonious organizational characteristics that enable effective knowledge management and efficient operations but poses challenges in adapting to new environments.

Japanese organizations

seniority

informal institutions

senpai–kohai–doki

ba

From the 1950s to the 1980s, the Japanese economy enjoyed miraculous economic growth, dominating the global market with high-quality, appropriately priced “made in Japan” products ^{[1][2]}. Among the factors contributing to its success are Japan’s unique employment practices and organizational structure, which allowed for teamwork and harmony among highly committed employees as well as flexibility in the business environment ^{[3][4][5][6]}. For example, traditional Japanese employment practices are often referred to as membership-based employment, in which employees are hired as members of the organization with no restrictions on job duties, working hours, or location ^[7]. Because they are members of the organization, their job security is guaranteed until mandatory retirement age, resulting in lifelong employment ^{[8][9]}. Other unique characteristics of Japanese organizations include heavy reliance on the batch hiring of fresh school graduates, employee development through on-the-job training (OJT), job rotation and employee transfer practices across departments and sections, seniority-based compensation and promotion, enterprise-based unions, a teamwork orientation, and consensus-based decision making ^{[10][11]}.

Behind the distinctive characteristics of Japanese organizations is the duality between formal job-based and informal seniority-based hierarchies among organizational members ^[12]. The formal job-based hierarchy represents organizational structure based on job titles and the system of responsibility, authority, and chain of command. The informal seniority-based hierarchy is based on the year of entry into the organization among

members. This informal seniority-based structure often synchronizes with the formal job-based structure to maintain order and harmony in the organization to create a family-like or village-like atmosphere.

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