

# Importance and Advantages of Interim Management for Strategic Business Development in Japan

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## 1. Executive Summary

When it comes to interim management, many people think of crisis management or corporate restructuring. However, the temporary takeover of business activities by an experienced interim manager can be an interesting and cost-effective solution, especially in the phase of building up or expanding business in the Japanese market. The setup of business in Japan means high engagement and also continuous presence in Japan. An own representation office or subsidiary is often necessary. But this means a quite high investment in the starting phase. This is a point where an interim management can be an interesting temporary solution.

Another reason for an Interim Management is if companies are not satisfied with the development of the Japan business by their partner or the existing representation office in Japan and if they plan a strategic reorientation, including new staff and structural changes. In this transitional situation, the Interim Management compensates the lack of staff, rooms, or other investments for a certain time.

Interim Management is also interesting for companies that want or need to be present on the Japanese market quickly, perhaps due to the rapid increase in demand. Even if the establishment of a branch in Japan is considered in the long term, many companies stay away from this step because of the increased costs, especially in the initial phase. In order to enable immediate operation of the representative office, interim management can be a flexible, effective and cost-effective solution.

The advantage: the interim management is available at short notice and can be arranged flexibly. The contractual relationships are simple. The high investments involved in hiring your own office manager can initially be saved during the transition period. In addition, a separate address and a – ideally Japanese – contact person on site in Japan is often immediately available.

Before searching for an interim manager, it is important to define the tasks (e.g., in a strategy workshop) and create a job description with the desired competencies. Interim Managers can be found through Interim Management Providers, or specialized consultants with direct access to networks in Japan. A service contract is then created to establish the remuneration and responsibilities of both parties. Finally, it is important to coordinate the interim manager's work closely and ensure a smooth handover process at the end of the period.

## 2. Scope of the Report

This report aims to give an overview on interim management solutions with a special view on its advantages in the Japanese business environment. It is addressed to small and medium-sized companies in the EU which:

- 1) already have an established business in Japan, but are somewhat unsatisfied with the current partner, current distribution network, or business strategy, and urgently need an interim manager for change management
- 2) already have some business in Japan, but do not have a representative in Japan yet and urgently need a person for interim management of clients and orders.

In chapters 3 and 4, basic information on interim management solutions in comparison with other management forms (representative, subsidiary, distribution partner etc.) is given with a special focus on the Japanese way of business.

Chapter 5 includes two examples of real cases of using interim management solutions in the Japanese business environment: one during a restructuring of the existing presence in Japan, one as interim representative office.

While chapter 6 gives practical advice for implementing interim solutions, chapter 7 summarizes recommendations to EU companies considering to making use of interim solutions.

### 3. Interim Management – what does it mean?

Interim management (IM) is a form of consulting in which a professional manager is hired on a temporary basis to fulfil specific management roles and responsibilities. Interim managers are experienced professionals who can quickly and effectively address strategic, operational, and financial challenges within an organization.

For over 30 years Interim management has been firmly established as a personnel tool. It has become increasingly common for companies to have no capacity or know-how for certain tasks and is particularly suitable for demanding projects, unforeseeable crises, or short-term vacancies. Especially in the automotive, chemical/pharmaceutical, ICT, mechanical and plant engineering, energy industry, and service and retail sectors.

Interim management means the use of experienced and proven managers for temporary executive tasks, not only in times of crisis.

Examples of situations in which IM can be a solution:

- A restructuring is to be carried out or a branch/production site is to be relocated abroad or a new office set up.
- A company or part of a company is to be consolidated/integrated after purchase (before a manager is hired on a permanent basis).
- A major project/major order is to be taken on quickly and at short notice.
- A generation change (e.g., within a family) should be accompanied for a certain period of time.
- The permanently employed specialist/manager is absent for a longer period of time at short notice and cannot be replaced internally immediately or the personnel acquisition takes too long or a manager for a permanent position is only available in months. For a decision that is sustainable in the long term, an IM leads for the necessary time.

All of these situations, occasions and reasons make it clear that interim management requires special (crisis or upheaval) situations in the company. Central to this is that the scope of duties and competencies are delimited and described.

Interim management must be distinguished from management consulting and temporary work. In contrast to management consultants, interim managers assume direct responsibility for results - be it in a staff position or in a line function; for interim managers, implementation on site in the company dominates.

Interim managers are exclusively available to the company around the clock from the moment they are hired - in contrast to external consultants. They bear operational responsibility: they take over the day-to-day business.

In the case of temporary employment, companies hire employees from temporary employment agencies who are permanently employed by the temporary employment agency for a limited period of time. This triangular relationship is regulated in the Temporary Employment Act. The right to issue instructions is transferred from the temporary work agency to the borrower during the loan; otherwise, there is no legal connection between the borrower and the temporary worker.

Temporary means that the interim manager leaves the company as soon as the task or problem has been solved or the project has ended. The employment relationship of an interim manager is usually limited from the outset.

## 4. Advantages of Interim Management

### a. Advantages of IM in General

In principle, the use of an interim manager is worthwhile if there is work to be done, a permanent position makes little sense and after the time has elapsed the specialist is no longer needed.

When does it make sense to use an interim manager and not cover it with your own staff?

In our experience, companies hire interim managers to bring important management, leadership and/or technical skills into the company for a limited period of time, usually to solve specific requirements such as staff shortages, the introduction of a new software solution, the restructuring of entire departments, optimization of process flows, company restructuring or closure of companies and to improve company results.

In many situations, the use of interim managers is advantageous and helps the company to reposition itself. Because here interim managers with their wealth of experience offer many advantages, such as:

#### i. Fast action and results

By using the "interim manager" it is possible to react and act quickly: additional temporary specialists can relieve the company management and executives in urgent projects or vacancies.

Interim managers are usually available immediately, while it usually takes 6-9 months to find and hire a permanent manager for a new position. Depending on the urgency of the project and the availability of the candidates, it takes a few days to 4 weeks to find a suitable interim manager. In contrast to a permanent manager, an interim manager only has 2-3 weeks instead of the usual 100 days to get used to the job. With expert knowledge and an outside perspective, interim managers often come up with quick solutions that they might not have even considered internally. And unlike a consultant, they also implement their solution approaches together with the employees.

An interim management assignment lasts around 11 months on average; the span ranges from three months to one year. The workload of an interim manager is on average between 60% and 80% of all working days per year.

#### ii. Cost can be calculated in advance

Interim managers offer a management level that would be too high and therefore too expensive for continuous use. The skills required for the company (management skills) are purchased on a case-by-case basis and as required.

Since the costs of the interim management mandate are calculated on the basis of daily rates, the costs can be calculated from the outset. The interim manager is only paid for his working hours, i.e., he has no holiday entitlement and will not be paid further in the event of illness. If you compare the costs with permanent employment, the following

expenses for the commissioning company are also eliminated: All social benefits, vacation pay, bonuses and premiums, company cars, further training measures, etc. This can be between 40 and 50% of a fixed salary, which puts the costs into perspective.

However, companies should also include the ancillary costs in the calculation, such as travel and accommodation costs that are incurred during the project depending on the location and/or travel activity.

The daily rates are between 1,000-2,000 euros and are determined by the project requirements, the current market situation and the management level of the candidate. A rule of thumb is also used here, which states that the daily rate of an interim manager is around 1% of the annual salary in a comparable permanent position.

Interim managers are only paid for the days they work, and they are only employed for as long as you need them. The clear agreements make it easy to plan in terms of time and money, so that there are no further costs from wages, illness or vacation during the project.

The interim management costs seem expensive at first, but if you take a closer look, this assumption is quickly revised. Because interim management and permanent employment cannot be directly compared. Interim managers are independent executives and experts who bear the full entrepreneurial risk themselves. Since they are not fully utilized throughout the year, they do not have a secure annual income and have to ensure financially that they can bridge periods without a mandate.

### iii. Qualification and Know-How

In addition to the additional management capacity, the interim manager also brings new, external knowledge, skills, and methods into the company, from which the company can benefit. Usually, they are experts with broad management experience in the areas of restructuring, reorganization, company relocation, staff recruitment/dismantling, digital transformation, change management, company acquisitions and sales, and much more.

Interim managers are objective and do not allow themselves to be drawn into company politics, as they are not aiming for a longer career in the company. Thanks to their many years of management experience and their political independence, the employees are usually more open to the suggestions and concepts of interim managers, as they sense that the external managers are not pursuing their own agenda but are acting in the interests of the company and the employees.

## b. Advantages of IM for Business in Japan

There are some challenging aspects of business in Japan which make interim management solutions even more advisable and important here than in other markets:

- Implementing new business structures in the Japanese business environment requires **high engagement, endurance and also continuous presence** in Japan. An interim manager can accelerate and smoothen the process.
- **Mutual trustful and personal relationships** are extremely valuable and important in Japan. A change in personnel or management structure (e.g., after takeover of the company or mergers with other companies) bear the risk of endangering a long-time business relationship especially in Japan. An interim manager can build up the necessary personal trust to the partner(s) in Japan to smoothen the transition and secure the continuation of the business relationship.

- Even though online meetings have been established in the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, **face-to-face meetings** still have an extremely high relevance and value in the Japanese business world. « Showing face » to partners and customer Regular contact and visits to the Japanese partner are crucial for the success. partnership. Personal contact is enormously important in the development of a business in Japan in general and even more in situations of conflict, crisis or change. An interim manager located directly in Japan can function as a « face » and reliable contact person in these situations.
- Besides official meetings and negotiations, the so-called **nemawashi** (literally: « dig around the root ») is a way of using informal personal talks with several stakeholders to prepare or support ongoing decision processes. This process can take some time, as *nemawashi* aims to involve all affected individuals and groups in the decision-making process and to find consensus. The necessary talks usually take place face to face and cannot be made from a distance.
- **Patience** and perseverance are always needed in Japanese business relationships. Due to the internal decision-making procedure (*ringi seido*) that is common in Japanese companies, the person you are talking to must first coordinate with supervisors and other departments and find a consensual decision. During this process, which is often quite lengthy, further information is often requested, which your contact person relies on for internal persuasion. Intensive communication and negotiation can take several months to years. An interim manager can accelerate the process by direct communication and on-site coordination and management.

A good interim manager supports the customer in communicating with Japanese customers, pays attention to professional maintenance of current business and - if necessary - carries out "troubleshooting". Customer care in Japan is extremely time-consuming and repeated personal visits are expected. Depending on the objectives of the interim management, he advises the client on the development of the Japan strategy, looks for new employees for service or a manager for the planned branch, promotes the development of new business areas and supports the company in negotiations with existing or new partners as a coach by the side. It is ideal if the office of the interim manager in Japan can also be used immediately as a representative address for a limited time. He can also represent the company at trade fairs and specialist events in Japan, do PR work or organize technical seminars for customers.

## 5. Example Cases

There are different situations in which interim management might be meaningful. Some examples taken from our experience are, e.g.:

- Company X is planning to expand its involvement in Japan. In order to meet the increasing demands of Japanese customers and to maintain and further develop the company's image in Japan, it is necessary to set up a representative office in Japan. But this step in particular is associated with increased costs in the initial phase and needs to be carefully considered.
- Company Y plans to restructure its business structure in Japan. A new representative office in the form of a branch in Japan is to be set up. Since the demands of Japanese customers must continue to be satisfied and the company and product image in Japan must be maintained, the restructuring should be carried out as quickly as possible and if feasible, without serious losses in the areas of service and maintenance. This is particularly difficult with additional personnel changes.
- Company Z is not satisfied with the development of the Japanese business and is planning a strategic reorientation, possibly including the recruitment of new staff and structural changes.



In the following, two real cases of interim management in the Japanese business environment are described in detail: one during a restructuring of the existing presence in Japan, one as an interim representative office.

### a. Example 1: restructuring business in Japan

This is the example of Interim Management of the Japan branch of a German recycling technology supplier (12/2013-6/2015).

This example is a quite common case: The company had been active in the Japanese market for many years. The joint venture with a local company (full-service provider for technology including plant construction) turned out to be an obstacle to developing additional customers and market segments. The JV partner only had a limited view of the market, the resources were too tied to other business areas. As a result, no strategic market development, active sales nor technical support were sufficiently provided by the existing JV.

After some conflicts with the existing business partner in Japan, the company decided a strategic realignment of the Japanese business. Abandoning the Japanese subsidiary was no option. Thus, the German company decided to rebuild it on its own feet, including an own representative office in Japan, new staff and structural changes. The target was to relaunch the client's existing business entirely and put it under the control of the client by an own presence in the market.

In this situation, the parent German company faced several challenges:

- the relationship with existing customers must be maintained
- the negotiations with the previous partner must be continued
- the ongoing demand from Japanese customers must be continuously satisfied and the company's image in Japan should not suffer
- the restructuring should take place as quickly as possible and without major losses in service and maintenance.
- at the same time a concept for the realignment must be developed and a new partner or new employee found, possibly even one set up by your own representative office or branch.

In this complex situation, a strategic workshop was carried out with all key persons involved in the Japanese business on the German company's side to evaluate the current situation, strengths and weaknesses and to develop a vision for the future business and presence in Japan. In addition, a market study and a marketing concept based on this study was prepared in order to analyse the untapped market potential.

As a result of the strategic consultations, an interim manager (Japanese native, retired experienced manager from a major Japanese trading house) was implemented as temporary representative and coach to coordinate the transition process for a certain period of time.

The following actions and tasks were taken over by the interim management:

- 1) Representative in Japan
  - In order to start operation immediately, the Interim Management took over the newly established representation of the company in Japan for a certain time so that current business could continue immediately.
- 2) Customer Care

- Due to the significant image damage and loss of confidence to the German company by the previous partner, the primary objective in the first months was to restore confidence of customers and to improve the image of the German company. The interim manager visited all customers to restore the company's reputation as one of the leading recycling specialists in Japan.
  - The interim manager supported the company in the communication with Japanese customers and also took care of the After-Sales service.
- 3) Sales Promotion
- The interim manager represented the company at an international exhibition in Japan, including PR activities (press conference, reception)
  - The interim manager developed a service network in Japan
  - The interim manager developed sales and marketing activities in Japan
- 4) Set up of full subsidiary incl. recruitment (originally planned)
- The interim manager carried out the recruitment for technical staff as well as for the future head of the subsidiary.
  - The interim manager took over the management and administration.
  - The interim manager searched for new office rooms for the Japanese subsidiary and handed over the subsidiary to its new head.

After twelve months, the decision was made to continue the IM, as the establishment of an own branch with own employees was abandoned for cost reasons. As an alternative, it was decided to find and build up a new partner with a good reputation and market penetration. After 24 months, the business was handed over to the new partner responsible for sales and after-sales service, as a representative for Japan.

## b. Example 2: interim representative office

This is the example of an interim representative office in Japan for a leading German provider of laser manufacturing solutions (12/2009-06/2011).

The German company already exported to Japan and cooperated with two partners in Japan, who sold products in two technology sectors on behalf of this company. One of the partners adopted the German company's name ("Nippon XYZ") and functioned also as a kind of representative for other business fields of the German company, albeit with moderate success.

After some years and intensive support from Germany, the headquarters in Germany realised that they lacked the necessary contacts, resources and sales knowledge to include additional business segments in their portfolio in Japan and approach new customer target groups. A greater market penetration seemed achievable than what had been generated to date via the existing partners.

As a first step, a strategic workshop was carried out with all key persons involved in the Japanese business on the German company's side to evaluate the current complex situation of the business in Japan including several market sectors and sales partners, and to develop a strategy of how to expand business in Japan in all market sectors.

It turned out that the potential for market expansion varies depending on the business fields due to existing, partially existing or completely missing contacts with potential customers in Japan, the competitive situation and technical unique selling points. In business areas that had already been established, it seemed very likely that further untapped potential could be gained through greater customer orientation and the company's own on-site service.

If a company has been on the market with partners for a long time as in this case, the goal of increasing sales in Japan can usually only be achieved by building up its own presence and service and sales capacities. For these reasons, it seemed necessary to set up an own subsidiary in Japan, in order to make up for the current competitive disadvantage in customer orientation, especially in after-sales service, compared to its Japanese competitors. The cooperation and the good relations with the previous trading partners should remain and be included in the new network of the German company's Japan branch.

The German company already had first talks with both Japanese dealers. They basically showed willingness to continue working with a newly established own subsidiary in Japan. However, some questions such as the right on the company name still needed to be discussed. It was clear that the name of existing trading partner needed to be changed before an own branch of the German company was set up to avoid confusion from customers.

In order to be able to operate independently in Japan, it was decided to establish a presence in Japan as a 100% owned subsidiary ("XYZ Japan K.K.") with a sales manager and two more managers for Sales, 1 in Service & Application. An own warehouse would be also necessary.

As setting up an own subsidiary and recruiting the necessary sales personnel in Japan needs some time, it was decided to establish an interim management office in Japan. In this case, a shared office in Yokohama was used by the Japanese interim manager (retired experienced manager from a major Japanese trading house) and an expat sales manager from the German company as well as a Japanese management assistant.

The tasks of the interim management were as follows:

- preparation of a concept for establishing the subsidiary in Japan including a timeline and business plan
- advice on the selection of the company form
- search, inspection and selection of a suitable location for the subsidiary
- recruitment of executives and managers through own networks, online platforms, recruitment agencies etc.
- Interviews with candidates and joint decision for the subsidiary manager and sales personnel
- negotiating employment contracts
- renting office space
- registration of the new subsidiary as K.K.

After 9 months, the fully owned subsidiary in Japan was established and smoothly took over the business from the interim management. For 7 more months, the Japanese interim manager supported the newly established subsidiary as a coach and supported the development of new business fields by searching for new partners, participation in trade fairs and other PR activities.

## 6. Practical Implementation of Interim Management

### a. Definition of tasks

Before searching for and contracting with an interim manager, it is important to clarify internally which tasks the interim manager is about to focus on. Interim management can contain different tasks such as:

- Support of the existing marketing and sales activities including customer care (continued communication with Japanese customers, if necessary, troubleshooting)
- Setup of business in Japan
- Interim customer care
- Strategic development and optimization of the Japanese business
- Advice and coaching in negotiations with existing partners
- expansion resp. establishment of a service network in Japan
- function as a Representative Director Japan for a limited period
- Support for the in establishment of a subsidiary or representation office (research for office room, staff recruitment, etc.)
- Supporting the integration of a company M&A in Japan into the group of companies.

The tasks should be well defined and described and should have a clear time limit. It must be also clear that no other employees in the company itself can take on these tasks.

It is advisable to prepare a job description with the desired competences and profile of the interim manager, including:

- Objectives of the interim management
- Intended start and length of the interim management period
- Tasks of the interim manager
- Competences and authorisations during the interim management period: e.g., budget, personnel, instruction and procurement competencies
- Required profile: qualification and professional requirements of the interim manager
- Information on remuneration scheme

### b. Finding an Interim Manager

Finding a suitable interim manager is not an easy task, as an experienced and qualified person which is available immediately and only for a certain period needs to be found. This holds true especially for Japan, where experienced managers with the necessary international and sales skills, and maybe even technical skills, are hard to find.

There are different ways to find an interim manager. One is to make use of an **interim management provider**. After the profile of the required person is forwarded to the agency, it is compared with the interim managers in the database of the provider. The interim management agency selects suitable persons and makes their profiles available to the client.

Interim management providers can be found all over the EU, and some of them also operate internationally. The advantage is that interim management is the core business of these companies, and that the manager pool has a

relevant size. The disadvantage is the relatively high margin costs (usually 25-30% of the interim manager's fee). Also, EU-based IM providers might not have direct access to networks, recruiting platforms and databases in Japan.

Another possibility is to cooperate with consultants specialized in the Japanese market. The advantage is lower margin costs and a direct access to networks in Japan, e.g., of retired high-level managers of major enterprises.

Job offer platforms of the local Chambers of Commerce of the EU countries in Japan can also be of help.

### c. Contracting

As basis for the interim management, a **service contract** is usually concluded between the interim manager and the company. This type of contract gives the interim manager the freedom he needs to successfully carry out his mission. In case a service contract is concluded, no social insurances need to be paid. As a precondition to this, the work content must be a project outside of day-to-day business.

This service contract usually includes:

- Full names of the contracting parties (EU company and interim manager)
- Preamble laying out the principal task of the contract
- Work content and tasks
- Start and termination of the agreement
- Remuneration
- Responsibilities of both parties
- Confidentiality clause
- Place of jurisdiction
- Signatures

In case an interim management provider is involved, the provider will carry out the assignment, negotiate the agreed terms and draw up the contracts between the Interim Manager and the provider and between the client company and the provider (triangular contracting).

The remuneration of an interim manager is usually based on daily rates, or on monthly remuneration, plus expenses. The rates depend on the task, the qualification and the experiences.

In Japan, a typical average daily rate would be € 1,000 to 1,500, depending on the current exchange rates.

When daily rates are quoted by interim manager providers/agencies, it is often unclear whether or not these daily rates include the agency's agency fee (approx. 25-30%).

## 7. Recommendations

### a. Clarify the strategy

As a first step at the very beginning, we recommend carrying out a **strategy workshop** with all key persons involved in the business with Japan. If prepared well and professionally moderated and documented, this kind of workshop can very efficiently evaluate the current state (strengths, weaknesses, hurdles) and the future vision of business in Japan.

As a result, an individual concept for the future strategy in the Japanese market, including an action plan with a timeline, milestones, responsibilities, deadlines and costs is developed.

This kind of workshop will also clarify if Interim Management can be a meaningful and viable solution in the current situation, and already defines the contents and tasks of the Interim Management, which is the basis for finding a suitable interim manager.

### b. Carefully choose the right person

It is not advisable to take the first person which comes along through own contacts or recommendations from others. Especially in the Japanese business environment, the reputation, educational and professional background, the experience and personality are extremely important. Former managers of major Japanese trading houses (e.g., Mitsubishi, Mitsui, Sumitomo), or with a background in major enterprises (NEC, Panasonic, Hitachi, etc.) would be ideal, although not easy to find (see also chapter 6.b).

As many managers and decision-makers in Japan still lack sufficient English-speaking skills, it is highly recommended to choose a person who is native Japanese with good command in English, or a non-Japanese person who is fluent in business Japanese and has a deep understanding of the way of business in Japan.

In addition, the interim manager needs to understand the corporate culture of the client company, its business strategy and its actual needs. He or she needs to have analytical and problem-solving as well as implementation skills.

### c. Conclude a clear and concise contract

The tasks which the interim manager is expected to carry out should be well defined in advance and described in the contract. Also, a clear time limit is to be set here (see chapter 6.c).

A confidentiality clause or a separate NDA (non-disclosure agreement) is also recommended as the interim manager needs to have access to all necessary information to carry out his tasks successfully which might also include internal and sensitive information.

### d. Coordinate the interim manager's work closely

The success of the interim manager depends to a great extent to the support he gets from the client. Even for the rather short period of cooperation, a trustful relationship is important as the interim manager is the "bridge" and also the "bottleneck" in the communication with existing customers or partners in Japan.

In the beginning, the interim manager needs to be provided with all information relevant to carry out his tasks successfully. Therefore, direct and fast information flow and close communication between the interim manager and the involved persons in the client company needs to be ensured.

Especially in the Japanese business environment, it is important to introduce the interim manager to customers or partner which might already exist in Japan. The ideal way would be a joint personal meeting of a representative of the client company and the interim manager with the most important customer. In this meeting, the interim manager can be formally introduced, and the background can be explained properly. If meetings in person are not possible, online meetings could be as well used to introduce the interim manager. After that, the interim manager should visit all important customers and partners in Japan to introduce himself.

Even if it is only for a limited period of time, it is recommended to prepare a business card (*meishi*) for the interim manager with an official job title and logo of the client company. This is very important in the Japanese business environment and helps the customers and partner understand the position and role of the interim manager. A possible job title on the business card could be “special adviser”.

In the course of the interim management project, regular communication and (online) meeting with the interim manager are advisable to ensure that the expected tasks are fulfilled in the defined timeline and that the project is “on track”.

### e. Strive for a smooth handover

At the end of the interim management period, a smooth handover needs to be ensured to guarantee a sustainable success and effect of the interim management. This handover depends on the goals achieved. If, for example, a new subsidiary has been set up by the interim manager, the newly established manager or business structure in Japan needs to be introduced to the existing customers and partners by the interim manager. Again, this should be done in a joint personal meeting of the interim manager and the newly appointed head of business in Japan.

We recommend keeping the interim manager for a certain time (around 6 months) as a kind of “coach” for the new manager of business structure in Japan. He can support the new management in the first months with his advice, can make troubleshooting if needed by making use of the trustful relationship built with customers and clients in Japan.

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