



Japan and IT—a personal perspective

Because of the large number of exports from Japan in the technology field, Japan itself is often assumed to be a highly automated country, with a commanding lead in the field of IT.

Unfortunately, a number of factors seem to have conspired to make that assumption null and void, at least until recently. Here are a few that spring to mind.

First, the Japanese language demands a different approach, comprising as it does two syllabic alphabets, and a collection of several thousand ideographs borrowed from Chinese (as well as our Roman alphabet). This in itself proved a great handicap to office automation, and resulted in Japan moving from handwriting to word-processing with no typewriter age between (hence an unfamiliarity with keyboards).

Close ties, such as equity crossholdings, with vendors have often led to various components of an IT system being commissioned from the same vendor, regardless of whether that vendor is suitable as a vendor for that product or not, and often regardless of price. Whole systems and processes tied to a vendor's proprietary hardware are more common than outside Japan.

One other characteristic that often strikes visitors to Japan is the relative inefficiency of Japanese office workers (especially when compared with the striking efficiency of Japanese factory workers). This is often attributed to the 'lifetime employment' factor, as well as the desire to appear busy, regardless of the actual result, and indeed it does sometimes appear that many Japanese have employment that would not qualify as 'gainful' in the West. These factors have had a considerable influence on both the extent and the nature of the deployment of IT solutions.

There are many other factors that come into play when discussing Japanese IT in the enterprise, but this should give a flavor of some of the problems we encounter in j-views as we examine Japanese IT in the workplace.

Hugh Ashton, Founder and Senior Analyst, j-views