



**ADAPTATION OF WORK CULTURE OF STUDENT INTERNSHIP FROM
MANADO STATE POLYTECHNIC AT GENSEN HOLDINGS COMPANY,
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Abstract

International internship programs are a strategic means of developing vocational students' competencies in facing the demands of the global job market. However, the success of these programs is not solely determined by the students' technical abilities, but also by their ability to adapt to the work culture of the host country. This study aims to analyze in-depth the adaptation process of work culture of Manado State Polytechnic interns at Gensen Holdings, Japan, covering six main aspects: cross-cultural communication, internalization of Japanese work culture values, psychological flexibility, team integration, work discipline, and the development of performance and work ethic. The study used a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with three informants selected purposively: a female intern, a field supervisor (Head Chef) from Gensen Holdings, and a supervising lecturer from Manado State Polytechnic. Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model and validated through source and technique triangulation. The results show that the adaptation process occurs in three relatively consistent phases: a passive observation phase in the first month, an active adjustment phase in the second to third months, and an integration phase in the fourth month until the end of the internship. Japanese language barriers and differences in communication styles are the biggest obstacles to initial adaptation, while psychological



flexibility and interpersonal initiative are key drivers of success. This study recommends strengthening pre-departure training programs, including functional Japanese language training in a work context, simulations of the Japanese work environment, and a more structured psychological support system during the internship.

Keywords: Work Culture Adaptation; International Internship; Japanese Work Culture; Cross-Cultural Communication; Vocational Education

INTRODUCTION

Globalization has fundamentally changed the landscape of higher education, encouraging vocational education institutions to prepare their graduates not only with technical competencies but also with the ability to adapt to cross-cultural work environments. International internship programs are one concrete manifestation of this orientation, providing students with the opportunity to immerse themselves in a real-world work environment abroad (Haryanti, 2024). In this context, Japan has become one of the most popular internship destinations for Indonesian vocational students, in line with increasing bilateral cooperation in education and employment between the two countries.

Japan is known for having a highly distinctive work culture, characterized by values such as *kaizen* (continuous improvement), *wa* (group harmony), *omotenashi* (sincere service from the heart), and a high and consistent work discipline (Pratama & Srimulyani, 2024). These values are deeply embedded in daily work practices and shape professional standards that differ significantly from those generally prevailing in Indonesia, where the work culture tends to emphasize flexibility, a family atmosphere, and more relaxed communication (Mandari & Hadi, 2021). The gap between these two work cultures cannot be ignored, as it is precisely here that lies the greatest challenge faced by Indonesian interns when first entering the Japanese work environment.

Haryanti's (2024) research on one hundred Indonesian interns in Japan identified that their successful cross-cultural adaptation was influenced by five main factors: language proficiency, prior international experience, on-the-job training, cultural differences, and social support. Language was particularly critical because its limitations not only hampered understanding of technical instructions but also hampered the formation of social relationships necessary to



accelerate overall adaptation. Meanwhile, Nasution and Haryanti (2025) emphasized that a comprehensive pre-departure briefing program was proven to significantly help students reduce culture shock and accelerate adjustment to Japanese social norms without losing their cultural identity.

At the institutional level, Manado State Polytechnic (Polimdo), one of the leading vocational institutions in North Sulawesi, has actively sent its students to international internship programs in Japan, including with Gensen Holdings. However, until this research was conducted, there had been no scientific study specifically analyzing the dynamics of Polimdo students' work culture adaptation at Gensen Holdings. Yet, a deep contextual understanding of this is crucial as a basis for evaluating and developing future internship programs. This gap serves as the starting point for this research: by integrating the perspectives of student interns, field supervisors from Gensen Holdings, and supervising lecturers from Polimdo, this study seeks to present a complete, comprehensive, and data-driven picture.

Based on the description, this study aims to: (1) describe the process and stages of work culture adaptation of Polimdo interns at Gensen Holdings; (2) analyze the obstacles and driving factors that influence the adaptation process; and (3) formulate recommendations based on empirical findings for the development of Polimdo's international internship program in the future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Adaptation of Work Culture

Workplace cultural adaptation is the process of an individual adjusting to the values, norms, and work systems that apply in a cultural environment different from their original background. This process is multidimensional, involving cognitive aspects (understanding the rules and logic of the new culture), affective aspects (emotional responses to stress and uncertainty), and behavioral aspects (changing behaviors to conform to new environmental norms) (Kim in Mandari & Hadi, 2021).

Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2020) break down cross-cultural adaptation into three interrelated dimensions: psychological adaptation (emotional well-being), sociocultural adaptation (the ability to navigate new social environments), and professional adaptation (performance in work contexts). Individuals experiencing psychological distress tend to have difficulty navigating their new social environments, which in turn negatively impacts their professional performance; conversely, well-established social relationships contribute to psychological stability and improved performance.



Berry (in Stogianni, Murdock & Bender, 2024) identified four acculturation strategies that individuals can adopt when facing a new culture: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. In the context of international internships, the integration strategy is considered the most adaptive because it allows students to function effectively in a new work environment without losing their home cultural identity. Recent meta-analytic findings confirm that integration is consistently positively related to adaptation success, although the magnitude of the effect varies depending on the context and individual characteristics (Stogianni, Murdock & Bender, 2024).

Japanese Work Culture

Japanese work culture is shaped by a strong foundation of collectivist values, where group interests and harmony are placed above individual interests (Pratama & Srimulyani, 2024). This is manifested in various distinctive work practices, including: *kaizen*, a commitment to continuous improvement, no matter how small; *wa*, maintaining harmony within the team and avoiding open confrontation; *omotenashi*, sincere service oriented towards guest satisfaction; and *horensou* (*hōkoku-renraku-sōdan*), a reporting, coordination, and consultation system that ensures the smooth flow of information within the organization (Mandari & Hadi, 2021).

Furthermore, the implementation of the 5S concept (*Seiri, Seiton, Seiso, Seiketsu, Shitsuke*) is a work environment management standard firmly held in Japanese companies, reflecting the values of neatness, cleanliness, and consistent habits. A firm hierarchical structure and respect for seniority also influence communication patterns in the workplace, reflected in the use of respectful language (*keigo*) and procedures for conveying information that strictly follow organizational lines (Salsabila & Pratiwi, 2023).

Cross-Cultural Communication in the Work Context

Cross-cultural communication encompasses the exchange of messages between individuals from different cultural backgrounds and is a key competency in international internship programs (Wibowo & Sari, 2025). One of the biggest challenges in cross-cultural communication between Indonesia and Japan is the difference in communication orientation: Indonesian culture tends to use direct and expressive communication, while Japanese culture relies on indirect communication (high-context communication), where the true meaning is often implied in context, intonation, and body language, rather than in the words spoken explicitly (Haryanti, 2024).



Wibowo and Sari (2025) found that Japanese language proficiency plays a crucial role not only in technical communication fluency but also in establishing social relationships and integrating into work teams. Students with more adequate Japanese language skills showed a much faster social adaptation curve, as they more easily built trust with local coworkers and more quickly understood the implicit norms prevailing in the workplace.

Work Discipline and Work Ethic

Work discipline is an attitude and behavior that reflects adherence to applicable rules, procedures, and standards in the workplace (Mangkunegara, 2017). Indicators include punctuality, adherence to procedures, responsibility for tasks, and professionalism in work interactions (Hasibuan, 2019). In Japanese work culture, discipline is not merely a formal requirement but an expression of respect for coworkers, the system, and the guests served.

Work ethic, on the other hand, relates to internal values that drive a person to work with high dedication, regardless of the presence or absence of external supervision (Sinamo, 2011). Tasmara (2002) defines work ethic as the totality of personality that expresses how a person views and interprets work. The concept of *jishusshin* in Japanese culture, namely the spirit of working independently without waiting for explicit instructions, is one of the most valued forms of work ethic in the Japanese workplace and is often the most challenging aspect for interns from more hierarchical cultures to internalize.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. This approach was chosen because the research aims to deeply understand the subjective experiences, perceptions, and meanings constructed by actors directly involved in the work culture adaptation process, something that cannot be adequately captured through numerical data (Sugiyono, 2017; Yin, 2018). The case study design is considered appropriate because it allows researchers to investigate a phenomenon in its real-world context, utilizing multiple sources of evidence simultaneously.

The research informants were selected using purposive sampling technique based on their direct involvement and depth of knowledge of the phenomenon being studied. The three informants selected were: (1) a 22-year-old female intern from the Polimdo Business Management Study Program who had completed an internship program at Gensen Holdings as the primary informant; (2) a 48-year-old Head Chef and field supervisor from Gensen Holdings, Japan as the first supporting informant; and (3) a 54-year-old



international internship supervisor from Polimdo as the second supporting informant.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews using a questionnaire structured around six research sub-foci. Interviews with the female interns and their supervisors were conducted face-to-face, while interviews with the field supervisors from Gensen Holdings were conducted via Line Video Call with the assistance of a Japanese-Indonesian translator. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (in Sugiyono, 2013), which consists of four stages: data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data validity was checked through source triangulation (comparing data from three informants), technical triangulation (comparing interview data with observation and documentation results), and confirmability through ongoing consultation with the supervisor.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Stages of the Adaptation Process Culture Work

Findings from the study disclose that the adaptation process culture Work student apprenticeship Polimdo at Gensen Holdings takes place in a way gradual and following relative pattern consistent, in line with theory adaptation cross The cultural adaptation process proposed by Kim (in Mandari & Hadi, 2021). Based on data triangulation from three informants, the adaptation process can be identified in three interconnected phases.

The first phase (first month) is a passive orientation phase, which female informants described as a "hold your breath" phase. This finding aligns with observations by field supervisors from Gensen Holdings who described Indonesian students as tending to observe first before taking action, in contrast to South Korean interns who are typically more active in asking questions from day one. This pattern is not a sign of a lack of enthusiasm, but rather reflects a more cautious response to a new environment, which can actually be a strength if not allowed to persist for too long.

"All I do is observe, follow, and try not to make any embarrassing mistakes."
(Student Informant)

The supervisor confirmed that the first month is almost always the most challenging for all interns. According to his report, students who successfully navigate this phase are those who are able to concretely map out the problem,



not getting bogged down in the overall discomfort but instead identifying specific obstacles and finding solutions one by one.

The second phase (second to mid-third month) was an active adjustment phase, marked by increased initiative in asking questions, a growing understanding of the logic behind the rules, and the development of initial interpersonal connections with Japanese coworkers. A female student informant noted a key moment in this phase: a senpai (senior) informally offering correction over tea with her, a small event that changed her perspective on the work environment.

"It's not a cold place, it's just a different way of expressing concern than I'm used to." (Student Informant)

Field supervisors observe that during this phase, students begin to make small, but actually constructive, mistakes as they try, fail, and try again. The supervisor's response to these mistakes is crucial: appropriate correction can build confidence, while insensitive correction can slow down the overall adaptation process.

The third phase (fourth month to the end of the internship) is the integration phase, where students begin to feel a sense of belonging to the work team. The most significant indicator cited by a female informant was when her supervisor entrusted her to lead the morning briefing in Japanese in front of the entire team, a trust that went beyond a technical assignment to a symbolic recognition of her acceptance as a team member. This three-phase pattern is consistent with the cross-cultural adaptation framework proposed by Mandari and Hadi (2021), which identifies preparatory, active, and final stages in the cross-cultural adaptation process.

These findings also replicate the U-shaped pattern of culture shock described by Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2020): a decline in well-being in the initial phase, followed by a gradual recovery as sociocultural competencies develop, until equilibrium is reached in the final phase. Field supervisors estimated that Indonesian students would need approximately 6–8 weeks to reach the expected performance level, longer than the average for participants from East Asia, but with the potential to surpass the team average once the critical adaptation phase is overcome.

Work Discipline: From Surprise to Internalization

Work discipline was one of the areas that caused the most significant "first shock" for Indonesian interns at Gensen Holdings. This finding was consistent across all three informants. Punctuality standards at Gensen Holdings differ fundamentally from those commonly practiced in Indonesia: arriving on



time means being ready to work when the shift starts, not simply arriving at the location. Consequently, students are required to arrive at least 15–20 minutes before the start of their shift to prepare.

Field supervisors confirmed that almost all Indonesian students experience an initial "shock" regarding this definition of punctuality, requiring 1–2 weeks to fully adjust to the habit. The experience of a female student informant who was three minutes late in the first week and received a silent stare from her supervisor, without a single word, is a powerful illustration of how nonverbal reprimands in Japanese culture can be more impactful than verbal ones. This mechanism aligns with the characteristics of high-context communication proposed by Haryanti (2024).

Regarding procedural adherence, field supervisors noted significant variation among students. Some had a natural tendency to be meticulous, while others showed a tendency to simplify procedures because they felt a shorter approach would produce similar results. This represents a fundamental misunderstanding: at Gensen Holdings, procedures are not simply guides to an end result, but rather standards that simultaneously ensure consistency, safety, and customer trust. Understanding why a procedure exists, not just what it is, has been shown to consistently improve student compliance after explanation.

After the critical adaptation phase, Polimdo students' work discipline generally showed marked improvement. Supervisors noted that feedback from Gensen Holdings regarding discipline was generally positive, noting that improving the culture of discipline on campus early on would significantly reduce the amount of "shock" students experience at the start of their internship. This implies that good work discipline needs to be internalized well before departure, rather than developed in the field.

Work Ethic: Motivational Transformation in Two Phases

The work ethic of the interns underwent two interesting transformational phases during the program. The first phase was a test of their existing work ethic, where the high demands of Gensen Holdings' work environment could actually suppress the motivation of students who were not mentally prepared.

"The fatigue is not just physical, but also mental—tired of constantly trying to understand, tired of constantly monitoring every word and movement to make sure you don't make a mistake, tired of feeling like a stranger despite trying so hard." (Student Informant)

Motivational turning points often come from small events that carry significant emotional weight. In the case of the female student informant, an



omiyage (gift) from a senior staff member accompanied by a brief statement acknowledging her struggles became a catalyst for her recovery. This finding is relevant to the concept of social support as a predictor of successful adaptation identified by Haryanti (2024): explicit recognition from one's environment of one's ongoing efforts can serve as a highly effective motivational support, even when it is very simple.

The second phase, for students who successfully pass the first phase, is the development of a stronger and more robust work ethic. A supervisor described this pattern: reading a student's journal, written with a tone of despair at the beginning of the internship, and then reading it in the fourth month with a tone full of enthusiasm and thoughtful reflection, was one of the most satisfying experiences of his mentoring process.

Field supervisors from Gensen Holdings identified the most difficult aspect of work ethic for Indonesian students to internalize as *jishusshin*, the spirit of taking initiative without waiting for explicit instructions. In more hierarchical cultures, acting without orders can be interpreted as impolite, so students tend to wait for direction even when the situation clearly requires action. Understanding that in the Japanese workplace, active initiative is actually an expression of respect for the team and trust in the existing system requires time and concrete examples to truly ingrain.

Cross-Cultural Communication: Language and Meaningful Silence

Language barriers were the most consistently cited barrier to adaptation by all three informants. Standard Japanese (*hyōjungo*) learned during on-campus briefings proved insufficient to equip students to navigate the technical industrial terms, internal company abbreviations, and sometimes regional dialects used in the workplace. Wibowo and Sari (2025) noted that the gap between general conversational Japanese and Japanese in work contexts (*shokugyō nihongo*) is often greater than expected and requires contextual exposure that cannot be fully simulated in the classroom.

The impact of language barriers goes beyond mere technical aspects. Field supervisors observed that students experiencing language difficulties tended to be quieter, less proactive, and more susceptible to social isolation from the team. The resulting cycle is self-perpetuating: language barriers reduce social interaction, which in turn reduces opportunities for natural language learning, which in turn further exacerbates the language barrier. Breaking this cycle requires active intervention from both the students and the work environment.



Besides language barriers, differences in communication styles pose challenges. A female student informant illustrates this perfectly: the phrase "*Chotto muzukashii desu ne*" (This is a bit difficult, isn't it) in Japanese conversation doesn't describe a technical challenge, but rather a subtle signal that a request cannot be fulfilled. Failure to decipher these implicit codes can lead to repeated miscommunications and potentially damage professional trust.

The most surprising aspect of communication, and one that required the most profound adjustment, was the role of silence. In Indonesian culture, pauses in conversation tend to be quickly filled because they are perceived as discomfort. In Japanese culture, silence is a respected space for thought. Learning to be comfortable with silence, rather than reflexively filling it, was one of the most important cross-cultural communication lessons learned by the informants during the internship. This finding aligns with what Salsabila and Pratiwi (2023) stated, stating that differences in nonverbal communication norms, including the use of silence, are a major source of misunderstanding in cross-cultural work interactions between Indonesia and Japan.

Internalization of Japanese Work Culture Values

One of the most enriching findings in this study concerns the process of internalizing Japanese work culture values. Field supervisors noted a significant gap between conceptual understanding and consistent behavioral implementation: Indonesian students generally arrived with a sufficient familiarity with the concepts of *kaizen*, *wa*, and *omotenashi*, but required more time to translate these into concrete, everyday actions.

The internalization of *kaizen* for a female student informant fundamentally changed her perspective on work quality. From initially thinking "it's good enough," she shifted to constantly asking what could be improved, no matter how small. The concrete example she shared—setting the distance between spoons and forks to be exactly 2 centimeters—at first seemed excessive, but after understanding the cumulative impact of such small standards on the overall quality of the guest experience, she accepted the logic behind them.

The value of *wa* (*Wa*) is the most challenging to internalize because it requires a willingness to suppress ego and individualistic tendencies. Informants acknowledged that this process felt difficult at first, but paradoxically, it actually created a greater sense of security when successfully implemented. This finding reinforces Berry's argument (in Stogianni, Murdock & Bender, 2024) that an integration strategy—where new values are adopted



without sacrificing one's original identity—produces a healthier psychological state than total assimilation.

"I actually feel safer working in a system like this, because I know there are people looking out for me." (Student Informant)

The implementation of *horensou* had the most immediately measurable practical impact: after consistent implementation, the number of informant errors decreased dramatically because any uncertainty was communicated before it escalated into erroneous action. This principle aligns with Mandari and Hadi's (2021) findings that structured reporting systems have proven effective in reducing miscommunication and improving the quality of cross-cultural collaboration.

For 5S, the field supervisors observed the most measurable and consistent progress. After 4–6 weeks, most students were already implementing the first three Ss (*Seiri, Seiton, Seiso*) quite well. The biggest challenge was *Shitsuke* , a habit that persisted consistently even without supervision. An effective strategy, according to the field supervisors, was to have students explain why 5S was important in their own words, rather than simply reciting the definition, because internalizing personal meanings led to much more consistent behavioral adherence.

Psychological Flexibility and Culture Shock Management

Almost all interns experience acute culture shock, typically occurring between the second and fourth weeks. Its manifestations aren't always dramatic, but they are significant: decreased motivation, increased mechanical errors, and withdrawal from team social interactions. A female intern described her experience as feeling numb, performing all tasks mechanically, with a voice that sounded flat even to herself.

The field supervisor observed a similar pattern across cohorts: students who were once enthusiastic suddenly became quieter and seemed mentally absent. Her approach to this was not through formal meetings with performance checklists, but rather through informal conversations in the cafeteria or on post-shift walks, providing a space for students to speak honestly about their feelings without feeling judged.

The student informant developed several effective coping strategies simultaneously. First, she established small routines that provided a sense of control in a strange environment: eating breakfast without her phone, taking a short walk after dinner, and journaling before bed. Second, she maintained an emotional connection to her home institution through communication with her supervisor, who offered not only technical advice but also a sense of



normalization. Third, she actively created moments of cross-cultural connection, from engaging in lighthearted conversations to bringing Indonesian snacks that served as natural conversational bridges with Japanese colleagues.

These findings are relevant to the coping strategies identified by Athallah and Dharma (2024), namely active language learning, building relationships with local colleagues, and community support among fellow Indonesians as effective mechanisms for overcoming culture shock. The supervisor noted that a regular biweekly check-in system via private messages, rather than waiting for proactive reports from students, was crucial because students under stress tend not to report spontaneously. From an institutional perspective, the supervisor acknowledged that the current psychological support system is still personal and inadequately institutionalized, and the lack of access to professional psychological counselors is a significant gap.

Integration in Multicultural Work Teams

The process of acceptance into a Japanese work team isn't automatic and can't be forced. Findings from female student informants describe periods of feeling invisible, physically present but not truly involved in the team dynamics. Japanese colleagues aren't unfriendly, but the initial professional distance feels thick.

The change occurred when the female informant shifted from waiting to be accepted to actively taking the initiative. Two strategies proved consistently effective: learning and using each other's names in everyday conversation, a small act that in Japanese culture is a tangible sign of respect; and bringing Indonesian snacks as an icebreaker that sparked curiosity about Indonesian culture, opening up more natural and less forced conversations.

The field supervisor identified a recurring challenge: Indonesian students tended to hang out with fellow Indonesian students and were less proactive in interacting with the Japanese team. This was an understandable psychological response to discomfort, but counterproductive to the adaptation process. He consistently encouraged students to go beyond their comfort zone, as authentic relationships with the Japanese team were a key learning experience that couldn't be learned from any textbook.

Overall, field supervisors considered the ability to build harmonious working relationships to be one of the strengths of Indonesian students. The natural friendliness and ability to lighten the mood, brought from their home cultures, are social assets highly valued by their culturally more reserved Japanese colleagues at the outset. Given time and opportunity to develop, these



connections can grow into genuine and meaningful professional relationships for both parties.

Performance and Productivity Development

The students' performance growth from the beginning to the end of their internship consistently showed a positive trend. A female student described the difference between her first week and her final month as "like heaven and earth": from needing supervision at nearly every step and taking twice the standard time, to being able to work independently and even mentoring subsequent interns.

Field supervisors confirmed that the most significant indicator of development was decision-making independence, that is, the extent to which students were able to operate without waiting for explicit direction for each situation. The final written evaluation given to the female informants identified three aspects that showed the greatest improvement: time discipline, the ability to read situations without being directed (*kiwotsukeru*), and consistent work quality from the beginning to the end of the shift.

Supervisors observed a similar pattern in students' weekly journals: a shift in narrative from predominantly complaints in the first month to more achievements and reflections on growth in the final months was the clearest qualitative indicator that adaptation had been successful. A critical question going forward is whether these high work standards carry over and persist in the Indonesian workplace after the internship program concludes, a relevant topic for further research.

CONCLUSION

This study successfully mapped the cultural adaptation process of Manado State Polytechnic interns at Gensen Holdings, Japan, through the perspectives of three complementary informants. Several key conclusions can be formulated as follows.

First, the adaptation process occurred in three relatively consistent phases: a passive observation phase (first month), an active adjustment phase (second to third months), and an integration phase (fourth month to the end of the internship). This pattern is consistent with existing theories of cross-cultural adaptation but has unique characteristics influenced by the cultural background and education system of Indonesian students.

Second, functional Japanese language barriers in the work context were the largest and most consistent barrier to initial adaptation, with impacts extending



beyond technical aspects to social confidence and the speed of interpersonal relationship formation. This reinforces the argument that the greatest investment in internship preparation is in Japanese language skills for the work context, not just general conversational skills.

Third, psychological flexibility and proactive interpersonal initiative are key drivers of successful adaptation. Successful students are those who don't waste energy comparing two work systems, but instead use their energy to understand why the system at Gensen Holdings works the way it does.

Fourth, Polimdo's institutional support system, in the form of regular check-ins and personal communication with supervisors, plays a significant role in helping students navigate the acute culture shock phase. However, the lack of access to professional psychological counselors is a gap that needs to be addressed immediately.

Based on these findings, the study recommends: (1) strengthening Japanese language training from the first semester with a target of minimum N4 proficiency before departure; (2) changing the approach to pre-departure briefing from information transfer to simulated experiences, including real-life work scenarios in a Japanese environment; (3) increasing access to professional psychological counselors as part of the international intern support system; and (4) systematically utilizing internship alumni as a source of experiential learning for the next cohort.

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