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**HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN
NORTHERN MEXICO: LESSONS LEARNED
BY MAQUILADORA MANAGERS**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With the recent passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement, the prospect of opening a manufacturing plant Mexico is becoming increasingly attractive to U.S. companies interested in "off-shore" production. Yet a large number of U.S.-owned plants -- plants called *maquiladoras* -- have been operating in Northern Mexico for some time. These maquiladoras were set up in order to reap the benefits of low Mexican wage rates, close proximity to the U.S., and tax breaks provided by Mexico's 1965 Border Industrialization Program. A key to reaping those benefits, however, has been effective management of Mexican production workers.

Managers who are currently thinking of setting up operations in Mexico can benefit from the human resource management (HRM) experiences of maquiladora managers. In order to find out what those experiences have been, we visited 18 plants in Tijuana, Mexicali, and Tecate, interviewing the general manager and/or the human resource manager at each site. This article presents the voices of those maquiladora managers as they described the key HRM challenges they have faced in Northern Mexico and how they have handled those challenges.

HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN NORTHERN MEXICO: LESSONS LEARNED BY MAQUILADORA MANAGERS

A growing number of U.S. firms are considering opening manufacturing plants in Mexico. Both the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the prospect of inexpensive labor in a nearby country have made such ventures particularly appealing to these firms. The presence of U.S.- owned plants in Mexico is not a novelty, however. In 1965, Mexico established the Border Industrialization Program (BIP), which permitted foreign companies to open manufacturing plants in Mexico and to import all manufacturing machinery, raw materials, and component parts duty free, provided that the finished products were largely exported; these foreign-owned plants were called *maquiladoras* or *maquilas*, for short¹. Mexico now has over 2400 maquilas (mostly U.S.-owned) as a result of the BIP.² With NAFTA, such off-shore plants have become even more attractive to U.S. firms, for while the BIP restricted within-Mexico sales of maquila products, NAFTA allows U.S. firms to manufacture in Mexico without such restrictions.³

Before setting up manufacturing facilities south of the border, it is critical that U.S. managers understand and prepare for the international human resource management (HRM) issues they are likely to confront. In order to identify key human resource challenges in northern Mexico and common methods of handling them, we conducted interviews with either the general or the human resource manager at each of 18 maquiladoras in the electronic apparatus and equipment industry. The maquiladoras were located in three cities: Tijuana, Mexicali, and Tecate. We began scheduling these interviews in August of 1994. Using the *San Diego/Baja California Twin Plant Directory* ⁴, we called each plant and asked to speak to the general manager or human resource manager. We then arranged a meeting with that manager at his or her plant. Each manager was asked to discuss challenges of managing human resources in Mexico and how he or she and his/her company handles those challenges. Approximately one-third of our interviewees gave us brief tours of their plants following their interviews. We

completed our interviews/plant visits in Tijuana by December of 1994. Our interviews/plant visits in Tecate and Mexicali were conducted between August and November of 1995.

Table 1 describes each interviewee. Note that, although we visited 18 plants, we had 19 interviews. Five of the nineteen managers interviewed were Anglo-Americans; three of these five managers spoke no Spanish. The other fourteen managers we interviewed were Mexicans; all fourteen of these managers were fluent in both English and Spanish. This article presents the observations, experiences, and insights conveyed by managers during the interviews.

Insert Table 1 About Here

Turnover. First and foremost, managers felt that the high rate of voluntary departures by production workers is one of the most significant HRM problems in northern Mexico. Interviewee 1, for example, remarked,

Turnover is the major issue facing this plant. As you know, the border is a magnet to the [people in] the interior of Mexico. There's a lot of poverty in the country. They see the border as two things: One, there are a lot of plants like ours, and two, it's so tempting at two o'clock a.m. to just walk across there.

A number of other managers made similar statements indicating that both the large number of employment opportunities in northern Mexico and the lure of emigrating to the United States lead to high employee turnover in that region. Interviewee 5 declared, "There's ten percent a month turnover here [in our plant]. That's pretty much the industry average." Said Interviewee 9, "You could get higher turnover because the plant across the street offers two pesos a day higher salary."

Several managers noted that high turnover in northern Mexico also occurred because employees from central or southern Mexico are inclined to return to those areas. One reason is that they discover the cost of living in northern Mexico is too high. As Interviewee 3 observed, "Expenses here are sometimes more than in the United States. The restaurants are crazy. Gas is expensive. The [cost] of living at the border towns is high." Similarly, Interviewee 6

remarked, "You have people coming up here. The number one goal of Mexicans is to own property. They can't buy property on the *frontera* [the U.S.-Mexico border]; it's too expensive." The winter holidays also prompt employees to leave their jobs and return south. Said Interviewee 15,

Eighty-five percent of the people are not from Tijuana. During Christmas, they go home. When you have eighty-five percent of 60,000 people going south, public transportation won't support that activity. Some people leave early, and they resign because they know if they come back they will have a job. Just to keep the operation going is a problem.

The turnover problem was described as particularly severe in Tijuana. Interviewee 6 pointed out, "If you compare Ensenada to Tijuana, Tijuana is certainly more competitive in terms of maquiladoras. In Ensenada or Tecate you have a much more captive workforce." Managers in other regions concurred. Said Interviewee 17 from Mexicali, "People in Mexicali are more stable. There's not as much turnover [as in Tijuana]. It's more competitive in Tijuana." Interviewee 19 from Tecate commented, "Compared to Tijuana there's a more stable workforce here. There are more [job] opportunities in Tijuana, and people in Tijuana are more likely to cross to the U.S. because it's a bigger city. It's easier to get caught in Tecate."

Management Approaches to Turnover. In their efforts to curb turnover, managers focus, in part, on salary. Said Interviewee 3, "Typically people pay two or two-and-a-half [times] the minimum wage [of approximately five dollars per day] because if you don't, nobody will work for you." Likewise, Interviewee 4 reported that "normally maquilas pay from 50 to 100% above minimum wage because people could not make a living otherwise." Most managers indicated, however, that salary adjustments alone are not the answer. Instead, benefits such as day care play a key role. Said Interviewee 10,

Turnover doesn't have everything to do with salary. It helps. It gets the people in, but it doesn't keep them in . . . Day care is very important to employees. They pay up to one third of their salary [for child care when company day care is not provided]. We [our company day care workers] watch them and besides that, we feed them. We also teach them handicrafts, to brush their teeth, and potty train. Our center holds 48 kids; we take care of them from one to four years old. We're building another center that will hold 96 kids from 44 days to 4 years old.

In addition to day care facilities, a number of other benefits are offered to retain employees. Interviewee 2 stated,

We have one of the most full packaged benefits because we provide transportation, pick them up in the morning and bring them back to their homes. We have a cafeteria subsidy. We have food coupons. We print them, the store sends them back to us, and we pay the store.

Short-term, rather than long-term, benefits are preferred. Said Interviewee 6, "There is much more emphasis here on disposable income. Having income in your hand rather than savings." Similarly, Interviewee 7 noted, "If I tell a Mexican he has to wait ten years to get some benefit, it won't work." (Indeed, Mexican law requires that employees receive their salaries in cash -- in part, according to Interviewee 8, because employees rarely have bank accounts.)

Other tools for retaining employees include bonuses for remaining with the company.

Interview 1 described his company's system as follows:

If they stay 30 days, they get a bonus. If 60 days, they get another bonus. If they stay 90 days we know we've got 'em; they've found a friend or something. The bonus system cut turnover from 7 percent to 4 percent per week in the last few months. It started a few months ago."

Bonuses are also used for encouraging employees' return after the winter holidays. Said Interviewee 12, "Over the Christmas holiday 40-50% of the people want to go home. I give them a bonus to come back. The more seniority, the more bonus."

A less common benefit is instruction in English. Interviewee 12 was the only manager interviewed who reported, "I have a professor who comes in twice a week to bring people up to a third grade level in English."

One of the most widely-used tools for keeping production workers is creating a festive company atmosphere. Said Interviewee 1, "We have picnics. It's a major expense. We bus them somewhere. It's a major activity, and we hope to get people to like each other so that they'll stay." Interviewee 2 noted that, like a number of other plants, his facility provided equipment for volleyball and soccer games during lunch. According to Interviewee 13, "If we would do a party every month, we would have less turnover. There are companies that offer --

as a fringe benefit -- music throughout the work day. Music that they like." Interviewee 19 remarked, "We buy them food-- pizza, celebrate the anniversary of the company, take them to *carne asada* [barbecue]." Such activities are consistent with the Mexican culture, which values *fiesta* (a term that literally translates to *party* or *holiday* but that, in the context of Mexican culture, refers to the idea that pleasure is central to living). As Jessup and Jessup⁵ describe the concept,

Fiesta is what carries the Mexicans through arduous tasks -- they know fun is on the way. They do not wait for their two weeks a year as we do in the United States. Celebrations are frequent and joyous.

Indeed, several managers mentioned that applicants for production jobs often ask how many parties a company has when deciding whether or not to work for that company. This high value placed on festivities may also reflect the youth of the applicants, who are typically between 16 and 21 years old.⁶

Employee Termination and Maternity Laws. Just as maquilas suffer from the departure of desired employees, they face difficulties when they want to terminate undesirable employees. Time constraints and the keen competition for employees often force the hiring process to be a hasty one. Said Interviewee 13, "Most recruiting is with signs and sometimes having someone advertise with a loudspeaker." Said Interviewee 19, "You need to hire people as they come. There's not enough time to interview and to check references to make sure it's the right person." Also, because many applicants are quite young, they frequently do not have references available. Although one might expect that a manager could simply fire an unproductive employee, the termination process is not that simple. Managers in our interviews pointed out that Mexico has elaborate labor laws that are very protective of employees. Said Interviewee 13, "Mexico has a lot of protection for workers in the law. It forces companies to be more careful in decisions. [Employees] are not treated well in one way -- pay, but they are protected by the law in many other ways." Interviewee 5 commented,

Outside of the employee shooting someone, it's impossible to fire someone. . . . You cannot lay off an employee. You can, but you need to compensate them. If a company does not pay its obligatory

payments when laying off employees, it cannot take its equipment out of this country.

Interviewee 8 noted, "Whether you have work or not, you still have to pay people."

Interviewee 17 was more specific about the obligatory payments:

We don't fire anyone when there is low demand because you have to pay 3 months salary, 20 days for every year [the employee has worked for the company], plus 12 days for I don't know what. They are protected like nobody else in the world.

Legal requirements for maternity benefits were also frequently mentioned by managers as troubling. Managers complained that employees sometimes seek production jobs only to obtain maternity benefits. Interviewee 7 noted, "If a person comes already pregnant to work, the *Seguridad Social* in Mexico won't pay them when it's time to deliver. The laws will force the company to pay." Said Interviewee 13, "In Mexico the employee has benefits of maternity leave -- a total of three months The problem is that for young people it's very easy to get pregnant and get taken care of."

Management Approaches to Termination and Maternity Laws. A common tactic for circumventing employee termination constraints is the one-month employment contract. Most interviewees made statements such as that of Interviewee 6, who reported,

Every manufacturing employee is hired by contract. You can have a one-month contract for the employee, but only for one month. You can't do it month-to-month. You can terminate the relationship at the end of the month without any penalties to the employer. If you decide to keep the employee after that point, then if you terminate them you have to pay

Such one-month contracts, however, do not always do the trick, according to managers. As Interviewee 19 observed,

Sometimes they are real good for 30 days. Then after 30 days they relax. If you get rid of them, they go to the labor board Sometimes it's easier just to keep them.

In some cases, when a parent company finds that operating in Mexico is no longer profitable, when layoff payments to workers are not financially feasible for the company, and when the company anticipates no future business dealings in Mexico, a more drastic and illegal approach is taken. As Interviewee 14 described the process, "Some businesses shut down without

paying workers, taxes, or anything else." Interviewees 19 noted that when this occurs, the companies pack up and leave the country overnight, typically leaving heavy equipment and machinery behind:

If any equipment is left, it's property of the union, and they can sell it. Sometimes it goes to social security if the company owed them money. It's a race between the union, *Seguridad Social*, and *Hacienda* -- the Mexican IRS.

Interviewee 18, who was both the general manager and owner of his company, pointed out that he could never leave in such a manner, for he has an extended family in Mexico.

Maternity costs can be avoided in a more legitimate manner -- legitimate in Mexico, that is. Said Interviewee 7, "In Mexico it's important to give a physical examination [before hiring a person] to make sure a person isn't pregnant." Such an approach is likely to raise eyebrows in the U.S., but managers reported that it is accepted and quite common south of the border.

While not all labor laws are obeyed, managers generally remain aware of what is legal and what is not. Said Interviewee 6, "Everybody reads the *Diario Oficial* to find out about the changes. It's like reading the congressional record. From November through January it's the most popularly read item. It's horrible to read, too. Just horrible."

Motivation. Managers frequently mentioned two aspects of worker motivation that concerned them: 1) workers' responsibility and self-discipline on the job, and 2) workers' reluctance to participate with suggestions and improvement efforts. Discussing workers' responsibility and self-discipline, Interviewee 5 observed, "You have to keep on employees constantly [to take care of the equipment]. Most are farm hands. They are not used to wiping things down and keeping them spotless. It feels like a never-ending battle to them." Said Interviewee 7, "The problem is not how to do the work. It's come on time, avoid absences, be nice with the other people. It's important to consider that these are very young people."

Interviewees suggested that, in the case of male workers, *machismo*, a trait associated with Latin American men, may be a factor interfering with positive work habits; machismo is characterized by pride, a reluctance to admit error, and an aversion to "women's work".⁷

Interviewee 5 remarked that women "have less need to thump their chests and prove themselves

as men. Young men need to prove 'you can't tell me what to do.'" Along the same lines, Interviewee 8 noted, "The men sit around tables and talk to each other. The women are the better workers."

As an example of the second motivational problem -- i.e., workers' reluctance to participate, Interviewee 1 reported, "I have a suggestion system, but nobody gives any suggestions. In two years nobody has given me a slip of paper with a suggestion on it. In my quality circle meetings, nobody talks." Interviewee 10 stated simply, "Direct labor would rather not get involved." Similarly, Interviewee 16 reported,

People do not tend to participate too much. I don't know why. Maybe because we don't say, 'If you give an idea we give you ten pesos.' We'd like to make people participate not thinking they're going to get a reward. We want them to think, 'The company will get better and I will benefit.' But they want the reward *now*. There are a lot of people that we need to say, 'Please be quiet. Don't stay 20 minutes in the bathroom.'

Management Approaches to Motivation. Managers have found that adapting to the national culture of workers is critical to fostering responsible behavior on the job. As Hofstede's research⁸ has pointed out, Mexico is a "high power-distance" culture; titles, and the status and authority differences that accompany them, are strongly respected. Consistent with Hofstede's point, our interviewees reported that production workers expect -- and respond more favorably to -- a parent-child relationship between supervisor and subordinate. Said interviewee 5, "There are certain things that you must not do. My name is not [John]. It's Mr. [Doe]. They don't understand if you come out here and say, 'My father was Mr. [Doe]! Call me [John].' You have to keep management separate." Interviewee 7 stated, "We have improved the absenteeism problem just talking with the people -- telling them they have to be responsible or what's going to happen when they get old. I always talk as if they were my [children]. I try to make them responsible. . . . In Mexico many people have no father, and I'm hiring very young people. I talk to them like a father." Said Interviewee 12, "I'm trying to create an atmosphere where you work here and I'm part of your life. I'm the father. You

definitely need to be more directive than in the U.S." Consistent with this notion, Interviewee 5 argued that it is important for managers to set an example for subordinates:

One [production supervisor] said to me, 'You're not like other Americans. You get here before we do and leave after we do. We'll do whatever you want.' That's been the *patron* image. If you tell them to be here at 6 and [you yourself] show up at 8:30, or if you try to leave before 5 to get across the border, you aren't going to get their respect.

In addition to adapting to the culture of workers, managers also used gender preferences in hiring to prevent motivation problems. Indeed, when driving from plant to plant to conduct interviews, we sighted numerous signs saying "se solicita personal femenino" (or, "seeking female employees"). Interviewee 1 noted that,

I'm under no constraints by the government for hiring. I can specify that I want women between 17 and 22 that are thin. I can specify whatever race I want. The women are easier to manage, easier to train, nicer to work with. Machismo is existent and rampant, and most people don't like dealing with it. You get uprisings, and then you don't have a plant.

Likewise, Interviewee 9 reported, "We hire women because the men are more conflictive. [Where I used to work] they decided to get rid of all the men. They just kept a few to lift heavy things. Here that's all we have them for."

Another tool for increasing worker responsibility is the bonus. Just as there are bonuses to discourage turnover, there are often bonuses to improve on-the-job behaviors. Said Interviewee 4, "You'll find attendance bonuses and production bonuses which complement the workers' salaries. These are weekly bonuses." Interviewee 3 noted, however, that "the bonuses were to give employees extra non-taxable benefits. But now it's getting abused. It came out that employees were getting far more in bonuses than in salaries. The government put a cap on it. You can only pay 40 percent [of the salary] in bonuses."

Managers were more puzzled by the participation aspect than by the responsibility aspect of worker motivation. The only answer interviewees had was to urge participation aggressively, rather than passively depending on a suggestion box. Said Interviewee 1, "I solicit ideas by walking around the floor and talking to people . . . It takes pressure. You have

to pump [suggestions and ideas] out of them." Interviewee 12 reported, "We'll get groups of people at random and ask them, 'What can we improve? What's important to the workers?' When we select people for these groups we want the loud mouths. You don't want the little girl who doesn't say anything." Perhaps the most aggressive tactic was that of Interviewee 17, who recalled,

One and a half years ago we had 37% efficiency in one area. I took people in my office for 15 to 20 minutes per day for two weeks. In one week efficiency increased to 65%, in one month to 102%, and 99-105% after a year. The people that know more are the people who are working [directly to produce the product].

Unions. Unions are a particularly major issue in Tecate; in Tijuana and Mexicali their presence is not as strong. As Interviewee 18 remarked, "Tecate has a very strong union because the union has more of a history. That's a thing that doesn't help Tecate [attract companies]. That's why [Tecate] hasn't developed as much."

Still, unions are a source of apprehension among managers in all three locations. Indeed, Interviewee 1 in Tijuana noted, "Everyone is scared to death of the union. Employees are well-treated, but without them [expecting] it and without us [expecting] it, there could be a strike. Interviewee 14 noted that unions "do nothing good for the worker. About 35 percent of the companies are unionized in Tijuana. In the southern parts, there is more unionization; it's a union stronghold." Managers emphasized that strikes are the decision of union leaders, not the decision of workers; workers have little influence over union decisions.

Given the stronger union presence in their city, it is not surprising that Tecate managers were the source of our most detailed information about unions in Mexico. Interviewee 18 informed us that Mexico has two major unions:

The "Black Union" is a hard union -- a demanding union that wants to really not negotiate but is constantly asking for money. It benefits the union leaders, not the workers. The "White Union" is a soft union. Its demands are more in line with a realistic financial impact. In many cases the labor law is so antiquated that through numerous loopholes the union leaders have prospered but workers haven't. Union leaders make a nice living without lifting a finger. Workers don't like the union. They don't like these people making money in the name of them.

Interviewee 19 offered a similar description, calling the white union the "peaceful union" and the black union the "hostile union."

Management Approaches to Unions.

Fortunately for maquila managers, union strength in northern Mexico has been attenuated by several factors. Interviewee 18 summarized these concisely. First,

Maquilas never needed unions to improve working conditions. We had a more lenient and proactive attitude toward workers [compared to] the [Mexican] national companies.

Second,

The maquila is the only bright spot in the [Mexican] economy now. By all means we [sur]pass petrol and tourism. We're the only sector that has seen growth in '95. The government recognizes that and says 'we're not going to rock the boat'. Ordinarily the union would be supported by politicians, but not here.

Recognizing that unions are not likely to become a more severe problem, maquila managers do not go to great lengths to fight the union; typically, they simply pay the White Union and accept such payments as a cost of doing business -- or, as Interviewee 18 referred to them, "a necessary evil." When a company has one union, another union cannot take over. Thus, paying the White Union keeps out the Black Union. Said interviewee 19, "You pay [the White Union] every month and they leave you alone -- like the Mafia. Most companies prefer to pay the White Union. I look at it as insurance. I cannot have strikes."

An alternative to paying the White Union is a tactic that, according to Interviewee 18, is less common in northern Mexico than in other parts of the country:

If you have political savvy and your workers go along with it, you can even set up your own union -- one that's more friendly to management. I could probably do this because I have a good personal relationship with my workers.

Such company-sponsored unions prevent both the White Union and the Black Union from making demands.

Concluding Remarks. Our objectives in this article have been 1) to reveal the human resource management issues that maquila managers tend to consider most significant, and 2) to

reveal approaches those managers typically adopt to tackle those issues. In meeting these objectives, we chose to present the material as directly as possible -- i.e., through a synthesis of exact quotes from managers in northern Mexico. It is important to emphasize that the human resource management approaches described here may not be appropriate for all Mexican production facilities. Undoubtedly, when companies decide which approaches to implement, if any, a number of factors will come into play, such as the size of the planned facility, the resources of the parent company, and the ethical principles of the parent company. Managers from the U.S., for example, may be uncomfortable with practices (e.g., pregnancy tests, gender preference in hiring) that are clearly illegal in the United States but are permitted in Mexico.

It is also important to emphasize that the observations, experiences, and insights presented here are those of managers in *northern* Mexico. Border towns are not necessarily representative of Mexico as a whole. As our interviewees' comments suggest, northern cities may have important distinctions, such as a greater concentration of manufacturing plants and a weaker union tradition than other cities. Such distinctions should be considered if companies plan to open facilities in central or southern Mexico.

In addition, readers should keep in mind that international human resource management encompasses a vast array of issues and practices. Here we have delved into a small set: those that were recurring themes in 19 interviews. The set is not exhaustive, and managers should not underestimate the preparation required and unexpected obstacles that may be encountered when establishing operations in Latin America.

Finally, while this article has focused on the challenges of managing in Mexico, it is our hope that an awareness of these challenges (and options for handling them) will not discourage south-of-the-border ventures, but will instead help managers run their Mexican plants more effectively.

ENDNOTES

¹ Jessup, J.M., & Jessup, M.L. 1993. Doing Business in Mexico. Rocklin, CA: Prima.

² de Forest, M.E. 1994. Thinking of a plant in Mexico? Academy of Management Executive, 8:33-40.

³ Paik, Y., & Teagarden, M.B. 1995. Strategic international human resource management approaches in the maquiladora industry: A comparison of Japanese, Korean, and U.S. Firms. The International Journal of Human Resource management, 6:568-587.

⁴ San Diego Economic Development Corporation. 1993. San Diego/Baja California Twin Plant Directory, 3rd edition.

⁵ Jessup, J.M., & Jessup, M.L., *op. cit.*, page 39.

⁶ Teagarden, M.B., Butler, M.C., & Von Glinow, M.A. 1991., *op. cit.*

⁷ Teagarden, M.B., Butler, M.C., & Von Glinow, M.A. 1991., *op. cit.*

⁸ Hofstede, G. Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Table 1. Interviewees from Maquiladoras in the Electronic Apparatus and Equipment Industry^a

Interviewee	Interviewee's Title	Interviewee's Nation of Origin	Company	Plant size	Plant Location
1	Plant Manager	United States	1	160	Tijuana
2	HR Manager	Mexico	2	213	Tijuana
3	Plant Manager	Mexico	3	32	Tijuana
4	Plant Manager	Mexico	4	35	Tijuana
5	Plant Manager	United States	5	453	Tijuana
6	Plant Manager	United States	6	780	Tijuana
7	Plant Manager	Mexico	7	15	Tijuana
8	Plant Manager	United States	8	34	Tijuana
9	Plant Manager	Mexico	9	415	Tijuana
10	HR Manager	Mexico	9 ^b	415	Tijuana
11	Plant Manager	Mexico	10	15	Tijuana
12	Plant Manager	United States	11	160	Tijuana
13	Plant Manager	Mexico	12	300	Tijuana
14	Plant Manager	Mexico	13	160	Tijuana
15	Plant Manager	Mexico	14	94	Tijuana
16	Plant Manager	Mexico	15	250	Mexicali
17	Plant Manager	Mexico	16	35	Mexicali
18	Plant Manager	Mexico	17	212	Tecate
19	Plant Manager	Mexico	18	40	Tecate

^a All but two plants have U.S. parent companies. The parent companies of plants 5 and 16 are in Japan.

^b There were two interviewees from Company 9: the plant manager and the human resource manager.