cigna healthcare

Cigna Healthcare International Whitepaper

Bridging the Gap: Cultural Awareness and Compliance in Healthcare for Japanese Expats in Europe

Global Health Benefits - Europe

Contents

Foreword

Culture shock is a well-known phenomenon which affects expatriates regardless of their home country and where they are assigned. For Japanese expatriates, however, the shock of living and working abroad can be particularly intense.

Not only are they used to living in a country where there is a strong attention to process, detail and punctuality, but they have become accustomed to Japanese corporate cultures, which are highly risk averse. When they are assigned to countries where there is a more chaotic, risk taking approach to life and work, it can therefore be highly stressful for them.

I often refer to the Japanese expression "jinji wo tsukushite, tenmei wo matsu" when talking about how Japanese society deals with risk. Translated loosely into English it means "do everything humanly possibly today, and tomorrow the heavens will decide".

In practice this means there is considerable pressure on the individual to take as many preventative measures as possible, and to put in the maximum amount of time and effort. If, nonetheless, they fail - once the heavens have decided - they are often blamed for not trying hard enough.

The temptation then, when expatriated abroad, is to take as few risks as possible, for fear of failure. It is also difficult to admit that things are going wrong, so a Japanese expatriate may just put on a brave face and suffer in silence.

These attitudes translate into Japanese healthcare too. There is an emphasis on preventative measures, and a regular barrage of tests to pre-empt health conditions. When there is a health problem or a procedure to be undergone, the view is that the pain is just part of the inevitable suffering of life, and procedures are often undertaken with little or no anaesthetic.

Paradoxically, the Japanese cultural reaction to an overwhelming and unquantifiable risk, which may cost money to mitigate, is often to do nothing at all. It is left to the heavens to decide, rather than take the blame for incurring a pointless cost – such as taking out a health insurance policy that turned out not to be necessary.

Fortunately, Europe has a reputation as being far less risky than other destinations for Japanese expatriates, so it is no surprise that after the pandemic, the region is one of the few regions to show an uptick in Japanese long-term visa holders - particularly to smaller Western European countries.

The challenge for us in Europe is to ensure that Japanese expatriates continue to feel safe and looked after during their time here. This will give them the confidence that this is an environment where they can take manageable risks, build the business further for their companies, and have a stress-free secondment for themselves and their families.

Pernille Rudlin
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Europe, Middle East & Africa Representative,
Japan Intercultural Consulting

Executive Summary

As Japanese companies continue to expand globally, Europe has become a key destination for international assignments. However, despite the international growth of Japanese companies, the number of Japanese expatriates worldwide has been on the decline since 2019, likely due to the effects of the pandemic[1]. This trend has persisted in both China and the United States, where the number of Japanese expatriates has been falling since 2012.

Nonetheless, there are signs of recovery in Europe. From 2023 to 2024, the number of Japanese nationals with long-term visas (3+ months) began to rise[2], and more Japanese companies continued to establish a presence in Germany, the Netherlands and France[3]. An increasing number of Japanese employees are being stationed across European countries, some in high-pressure roles and often having to face the challenge of adapting to unfamiliar cultures and healthcare systems.

One major area of concern for many is the cultural gap between Japanese and European healthcare practices. In some cases, these differences can lead to confusion and stress, and even delayed access to care, which ultimately impacts employee's well-being, morale and productivity.

For HR departments and global mobility teams, ensuring access to reliable and culturally sensitive healthcare is no longer a nice-to-have: it's essential to ensure the success of an international assignment.

By adopting a structured, culturally aware and legally compliant approach to healthcare, Japanese multinational companies can better support their overseas employees. Together, cultural awareness and compliance form the cornerstone of a healthy, productive experience for Japanese expatriates in Europe. By fostering an environment where healthcare is both culturally competent and legally sound, employers can help their expatriate workforce navigate the complexities of living and working abroad with confidence, while enhancing their overall well-being.

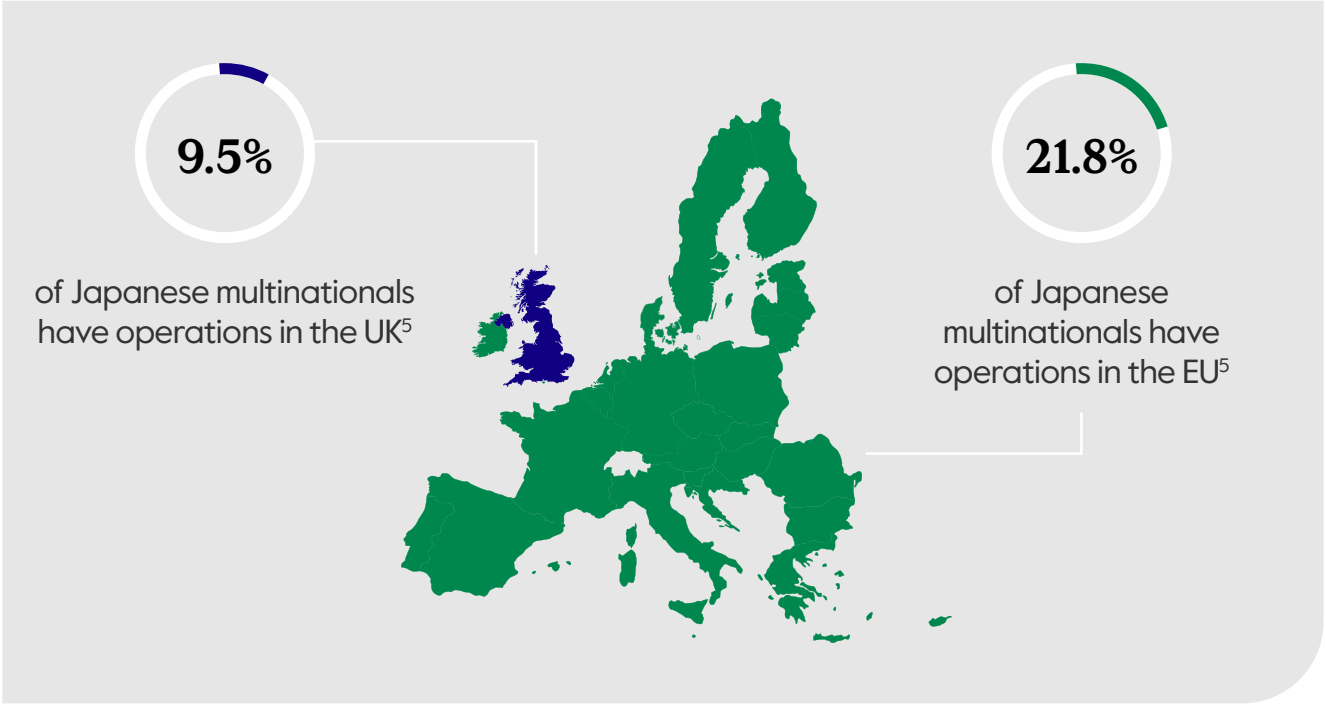
[1] Annual Report of Statistics on Japanese Nationals Overseas, Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024 https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100781392.pdf pg. 5
[2] Annual Report of Statistics on Japanese Nationals Overseas, Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024 https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100781392.pdf pg. II
[3] Survey on the number of overseas bases of Japanese companies, Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024 https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/ecm/ec/page22_003410.html

Introduction

As companies continue to globalise and endeavour to incentivise their employees to relocate abroad, Europe has become a key destination for a mobilised international workforce.

Although the US still attracts more Japanese professionals than Europe, it is expected that the number of Japanese professionals in Europe will continue rising in the coming years.

This is reflected in the rising numbers of Japanese long-term visa holders (3+ months) in smaller European countries like Netherlands, Austria, Ireland, Denmark, Norway, Portugal, Finland and Luxembourg, and Eastern European countries like Czechia and Poland[4].



Furthermore, **46.2% of Japanese companies who already have operations in Europe are planning to expand in Europe[6]**, and there has been a 0.9% increase in the number of Japanese citizens on long term visas in Western Europe in 2023/24, the first increase since 2018/19[7]. Therefore, it is very likely that the number of Japanese professionals in Europe will increase in the following years.

[4] Annual Report of Statistics on Japanese Nationals Overseas, Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024: https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100781392.pdf pg. II
[5] Survey on the Overseas Business Expansion of Japanese Companies FY2024: https://www.jetro.go.jp/ext_images/_Reports/01/c45cf2de4d0ebf45/20240043.pdf
[6] JETRO FY2024 Survey on the Status of Japanese Companies Expanding Overseas (Europe) (December 2024): https://www.jetro.go.jp/ext_images/en/reports/survey/pdf/2024/Europe2024_EN.pdf
[7] List of Statistics on the Number of Japanese Nationals Living Overseas, Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs: https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/toko/page22_003338.html

These results are consistent with some of Cigna Healthcare's latest findings. As part of **our commitment to supporting the health and well-being of global employees**, Cigna Healthcare recently conducted the Cigna Healthcare International Health Study, surveying more than 10,000 respondents in 11 markets. The findings reveal that globally mobile individuals generally display high levels of satisfaction with their relocation, with 75% perceiving their move as 'very' or 'somewhat' successful. Additionally, 39% of those who live and work overseas currently are likely to remain so for the next year[8].

The importance of cultural awareness in healthcare for an international mobile workforce

Cultural awareness in healthcare refers to the knowledge of social and cultural factors that influence health behaviours and decisions, ensuring that care is not only effective but also respectful of a patient's background[9]. For expatriates, this means healthcare interventions that are tailored to their cultural preferences, dietary needs, expectations of care, and sensitivities around language barriers that could impact care, amongst other aspects. The cultural competence of healthcare providers is critical for delivering high-quality, patient-centred care while minimising disparities in healthcare outcomes[10].

For Japanese employees settling in Europe, **cultural awareness in healthcare becomes crucial as they try and settle down somewhere new**. In Japan, the healthcare system follows a patient-centred approach, where an emphasis is placed on personalised care and nutritional management, with registered dieticians actively intervening in patient care to ensure optimal outcomes[11].

This focus on individual health needs and cultural sensitivities is mirrored by the growing trend of expatriates seeking similar levels of care while abroad. As the number of Japanese citizens on long-term visas in Europe rises, understanding and respecting these cultural nuances in healthcare becomes crucial.

Compliance and a culturally-aware approach to healthcare

In tandem with cultural awareness, compliance with local laws, ethical standards, and healthcare procedures is essential. For Japanese expatriates, **understanding European regulations and healthcare frameworks ensures that their health needs are met in accordance with both legal requirements and cultural sensitivities**. Compliance with these guidelines safeguards employee health and safety, minimises risks for employers, and ultimately supports the success of international assignments.

Together, cultural awareness and compliance form the cornerstone of a healthy, productive experience for Japanese employees in Europe. By fostering an environment where access to healthcare is both culturally competent and legally sound, employers can help their expatriate workforce navigate the complexities of living and working abroad with confidence, while enhancing their overall well-being.

[8] Cigna Healthcare International Health study, Globally Mobile Edition: https://www.cignaglobal.com/blog/thought-leadership/globally-mobile-2025
[9] 'Increasing cultural awareness: qualitative study of nurses' perceptions about cultural competence training'. Kaihlanen et.al. (2019): https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s12912-019-0363-x#citeas
[10] 'Cultural Competence in Healthcare and Healthcare Education'. Constantinou et.al. (November 2022): https://www.researchgate.net/publication/365854476_Cultural_Competence_in_Healthcare_and_Healthcare_Education
[11] Report on the nature, characteristics, and outcomes of the Japanese healthcare system (PubMed Central): https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8884037/

Cultural awareness in focus

Are there any cultural differences between Japanese and European health practices?

Cultural differences in health practices between Japan and Europe can be quite striking, reflecting deeply rooted values and approaches to health and well-being. For example, **in Japan** there is a **strong emphasis on preventative care and holistic well-being**, with practices like regular health check-ups, such as the 'Ningen Dock' exam - a comprehensive health examination designed to provide a complete health assessment - and traditional therapies such as acupuncture and herbal medicine being common[12].

In contrast, health practices **in Europe** tend to focus more on **treating specific health issues and conditions as they arise**, with a clear distinction between medical treatment and lifestyle management. For instance, in the UK, the National Health Service (NHS) often emphasises symptom-based care and has a more clinical approach to health, whereas Japan's health model involves continuous monitoring and community-based health initiatives[13]. A notable example is the Japanese practice of age-based health promotion, where individuals of certain ages participate in screenings and preventative programmes tailored to their life stage, which contrasts with Europe's more individualised, reactive approach to healthcare[14].

What are the benefits of taking a culturally aware approach in healthcare?

Improved health outcomes Culturally aware healthcare helps employees overcome barriers like language differences and unfamiliar care systems. This encourages greater adherence to treatment plans, faster recovery and prevention of health issues, ultimately enhancing overall well-being, resilience and vitality.

Increased productivity
When employees feel confident in their access to culturally sensitive care, they are less likely to be distracted or limited by health concerns. This contributes to higher focus, better performance, and a smoother, more successful international assignment.

Enhanced corporate reputation
Offering culturally aware access to healthcare demonstrates that an organisation values and respects their globally mobile workforce. This strengthens a company's reputation as a compassionate, forward-thinking employer, supporting both talent retention and employer brand[15].

[12] Report on the nature, characteristics, and outcomes of the Japanese healthcare system (PubMed Central): https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8884037/
[13] EU Global Health Strategy. Better health for all in a changing world. EU Commission (2022): https://health.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-10/international_ghs-report-2022_en.pdf
[14] EU Global Health Strategy. Better health for all in a changing world. EU Commission (2022): https://health.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-10/international_ghs-report-2022_en.pdf
[15] Cigna Healthcare Vitality Study – Globally Mobile Edition. https://www.cignaglobal.com/blog/thought-leadership/cigna-healthcare-vitality-study-globally-mobile-edition

Local compliance in European healthcare

For Japanese multi-national companies sending employees on international assignments to Europe, ensuring local compliance in healthcare is not just a legal obligation: it's a **strategic necessity**. Adhering to European regulations helps protect the health and well-being of expatriates, while also aligning with corporate values and maintaining a positive reputation abroad.

Compliance frameworks are designed to safeguard workers' rights and guarantee proper access to healthcare services during their time abroad. **Japanese multi-national companies must ensure their overseas operations adhere to local laws** while also ensuring cultural sensitivities are taken into consideration.

To avoid legal or reputational risks, employers must stay informed about country-specific requirements, including local insurance mandates and employer obligations. For example, many European countries have universal healthcare systems but still require employers to contribute to statutory health insurance schemes and companies to register their plans with government agencies. In some cases, some countries may determine which treatments and services should be included in a policy.

In Germany, where over 42,000 residents from Japan live[16], every person who lives or works in this country is legally obliged to take out the statutory health insurance or a substitutive health insurance to cover the cost of, for example, consulting a general practitioner, hospital treatment and prescription medication. The social law book (SGB V) and the Insurance Contract Act (VVG) define which benefits need to be included and what other obligations need to be fulfilled (for example age-reserves). Everyone with statutory or substitutive health cover in Germany is obliged to purchase a long-term care plan.

In Switzerland, health coverage for inbound expatriates must meet the legislative requirements of both the Swiss Health Insurance Law (KVG) as part of the social security system and the Swiss Financial Market Supervisory (FINMA) that regulates private insurance in Switzerland unless the individual is eligible for exemption.

In the Netherlands, the Dutch Health Insurance Act requires residents and tax payers, including expatriates, to participate in the Dutch social security system. To comply with this requirement, they must be insured under a policy issued by a private health insurance company licensed in the Netherlands unless the individual is eligible for exemption.

[16] Number of residents from Japan living in Germany from 2014 to 2023 (statista): https://www.statista.com/statistics/1038414/japan-number-japanese-residents-germany/

As well as this, **understanding the distinction between short and long-term assignments is a crucial aspect to consider** when navigating healthcare compliance in Europe. These assignment types often trigger different legal and administrative obligations, particularly in areas such as social security registration, employer contributions, and reimbursement processes.

For expatriates legally residing in one of the EU Member States for more than four weeks, employers must provide clear documentation, in writing, about the work assignment before departure, including information about remuneration, benefits, repatriation conditions, and any allowances related to the posting, amongst other details[17].

Linked to the idea above, the terms of employment must ensure there are standard employee regulations in the workplace, such as health and safety measures or protection for pregnant women[18]. In the case of the UK, although it is no longer part of the EU, there are still compliance requirements that overlap with EU regulations, such as the provision of safe working conditions and appropriate healthcare coverage for expatriates[19].

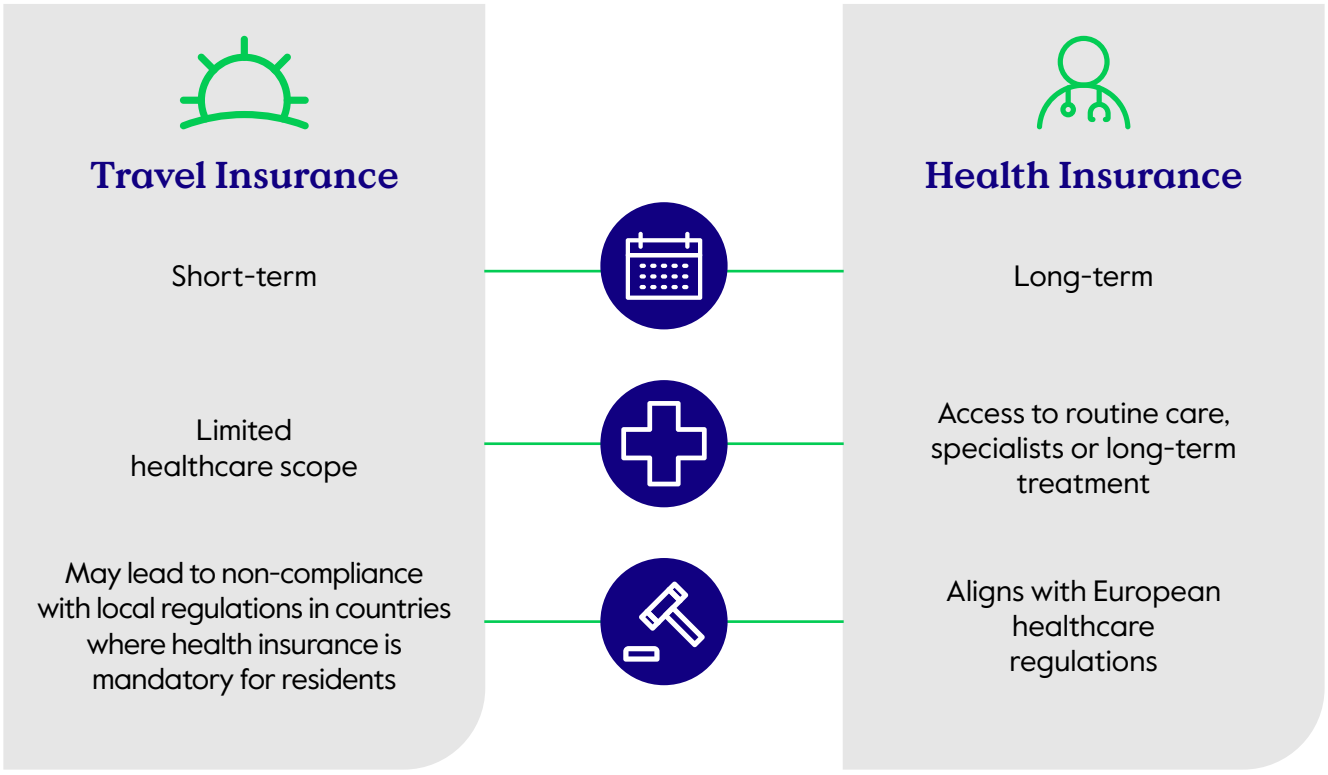
[17] Posting staff abroad (Resources from Your Europe): https://europa.eu/youreurope/business/human-resources/posted-workers/posting-staff-abroad/index_en.htm
[18] Posting staff abroad (Resources from Your Europe): https://europa.eu/youreurope/business/human-resources/posted-workers/posting-staff-abroad/index_en.htm
[19] EU Global Health Strategy. Better health for all in a changing world. EU Commission (2022): https://health.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-10/international_ghs-report-2022_en.pdf

Travel insurance vs. health insurance

It is important to clarify that even though travel insurance may seem like a convenient choice for Japanese employees on assignment in Europe, that couldn't be further from the truth. Travel insurance is designed for short-term stints abroad, holidays or trips of six months or less, and typically covers unexpected medical events, such as accidents or sudden illnesses, but it does not provide access to routine care, specialist visits, or long-term treatment. This limited scope can leave expats without essential healthcare coverage, especially when managing chronic conditions or ensuring continuity of care during a prolonged stay. And importantly, relying solely on travel insurance may lead to non-compliance with local regulations in countries where health insurance is mandatory for residents, exposing both the employer and the employee to legal, financial and health risks.

In contrast, international health insurance is tailored to meet the needs of an international workforce and aligns with European healthcare regulations. It offers broader and consistent coverage, including preventive care and maternity services, that is also locally compliant. International health insurance – such as Cigna Healthcare's International Health solutions – goes beyond emergency situations: **it looks after the employee in every aspect of their life, for the entire period they are away from home**.

The global extensive network that comes from working with an experienced international partner like Cigna Healthcare means the healthcare support always reflects the country or territory in which your employees are based. The cover is always based on extensive experience of the destination, using insider knowledge to ensure every situation is covered.



Employer responsibilities, liabilities and non-compliance

Japanese employers have a clear legal and ethical responsibility to safeguard the well-being of their expatriate employees, particularly when it comes to healthcare coverage and overall safety during international assignments. This duty of care extends beyond basic support and **requires employers to take all reasonable steps to prevent harm, ensure access to appropriate healthcare services, and minimise avoidable risks while abroad**[20]. Fulfilling these obligations is not only a matter of compliance, but also a reflection of a company's values and global commitment to employee health and well-being.

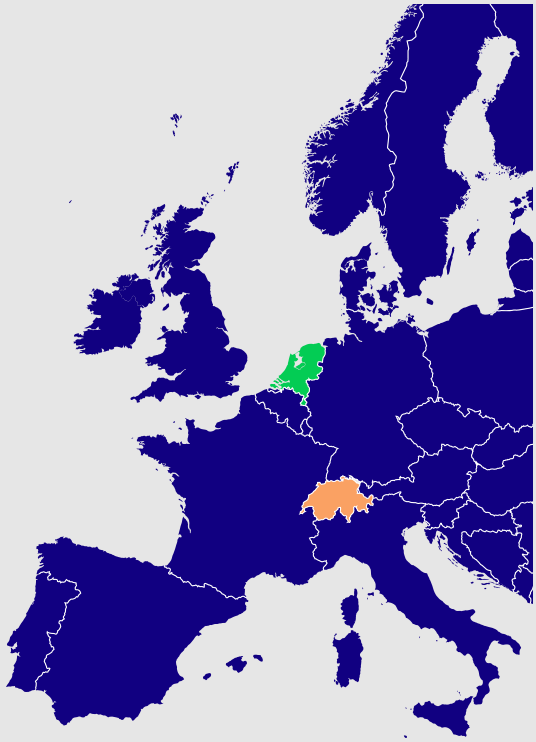
Failure to meet these responsibilities can lead to serious consequences:

1. Legal liabilities

Non-compliance with local healthcare regulations and labour laws may result in lawsuits, financial penalties, or regulatory sanctions. These risks vary across jurisdictions and can escalate if there's evidence of negligence or lack of oversight.

In Switzerland, enrolment with any insurer in this country should be processed within three months from becoming subject to Swiss basic insurance. If the enrolment is not processed within this time frame, a fine may be applied as the basic insurer, by law, must backdate the enrolment to the date they became eligible for the Swiss insurance.

In the Netherlands, health insurance, if eligible, must be taken out within 4 months and must be effective from the date the residence permit comes into effect. Those without a basic insurance face a fine amounting to 130% of the premium health package.



2. Reputational damage

Falling short of compliance expectations (especially when it affects employee well-being) can lead to negative press, strained stakeholder relationships, and a damaged employer brand, both in Japan and internationally.

[20] Cigna Healthcare Vitality Study – Globally Mobile Edition. https://www.cignaglobal.com/blog/thought-leadership/cigna-healthcare-vitality-study-globally-mobile-edition

How to ensure fairness, transparency and local compliance?

To deliver culturally mindful and locally compliant access to healthcare for internationally mobile Japanese employees, employers can take several proactive steps that promote fairness, transparency and risk mitigation across their workforce. These practices not only **ensure employees receive equitable support across geographies** but also help employers maintain compliance, build trust, and **enhance their reputation as a globally responsible organisation**. Key actions include:

1. Standardising core benefits

While healthcare systems and regulations may vary from country to country, offering a consistent core set of benefits across all international assignments ensures equitable access to care. This approach globally harmonises coverage, reinforcing fairness, and can significantly improve how employees perceive their employer's commitment to their well-being, regardless of location.

2. Providing flexible, localised plans

Building in optional benefits tailored to specific regional needs allows employers to adapt to local health risks and expectations. For example, in countries with high sun exposure, including additional skin cancer screenings demonstrates a responsive, culturally aware approach to preventive care.

3. Combining central oversight with local expertise

Establishing a global benefits team and working with an experienced international health partner enables organisations to maintain consistency in benefits strategy while addressing local compliance nuances. This dual approach helps to meet compliance standards, mitigates legal risk, and ensures employee needs are met on the ground.

4. Conducting regular compliance audits

A periodic review of international health plans and policies can uncover potential gaps before they become costly legal or reputational issues. Staying ahead of changes in local regulations is essential for long-term risk management.

5. Prioritising employee communication

Keeping international employees well-informed about their healthcare benefits entitlements and local variations reduces confusion and builds trust, even more importantly when a culturally aware approach to healthcare is required. Clear, ongoing communication is key to helping employees feel supported throughout their assignment.

6. Working with experienced international health providers

Partnering with experienced international providers or consultants who have in-depth knowledge of local labour and insurance laws enables accurate, region- specific plan design, and faster resolution of compliance concerns.

Actionable checklist: enhancing healthcare support for Japanese international employees in Europe

When managing expatriates, and more particularly Japanese nationals on assignment in Europe, HR departments must adopt a structured, proactive approach to ensure their healthcare experience is not only compliant with local regulations but also culturally aware and effective. Below is a practical checklist to help HR and International Mobility and Benefits teams strengthen their healthcare support for Japanese expats in European host countries:

Checklist

1. Map out local compliance requirements
Develop a clear overview of country-specific healthcare and labour regulations, including mandatory insurance, social security obligations and employer responsibilities related to health and safety.

2. Create a compliance integration strategy
Design internal processes that streamline adherence to local laws while aligning with global company policies. Include regular compliance audits and leverage local legal partners for up-to-date guidance.

3. Develop best practices for navigating local healthcare systems
Offer clear guidance to your globally mobile team on how to access medical care and overall well-being services and resources in their language, offering step-by-step instructions where possible.

4. Foster culturally sensitive healthcare engagement
Deliver culturally informed communication and stay up to date about expectations around care and common health and well-being concerns Japanese expats may have.

5. Offer localised and culturally relevant resources
Curate a toolkit of healthcare-related resources tailored to Japanese employees, including mental health support, preventative care tips, and access to designated Japanese speaking providers and clinics per region.

Checklist

6. Tailor benefits to assignment duration and specific regional needs
Ensure the right coverage is in place depending on whether the assignment is short or long term and consider building optional benefits tailored to specific regional needs.

7. Maintain transparent employee communication
Keep your globally mobile team informed about their benefits, entitlements and healthcare options through clear and consistent communication before, during and after relocation.

8. Establish central oversight with local flexibility
Ensure global consistency through a centralised benefits strategy, while allowing space for country-specific adaptations based on legal requirements and healthcare environments.

9. Partner with an experienced health and benefits provider
Work with partners who offer both global harmonisation and deep local expertise like Cigna Healthcare to help bridge compliance, cost control and cultural understanding.

Building trust: why partnering with experienced international providers matters

- **Dedicated 24/7 native speaking Japanese customer service line.**
- **Telehealth consultations, International Employee Assistance Programme and personalised customer portal available in Japanese.**
- **Access to enhanced wellness exams, traditional Chinese medicine and broader coverage for alternative therapies, as well as access to services and literature in Japanese.**
- **Direct settlement with Japanese specialist clinics in Europe and worldwide.**
- **Specialised support for employers and a dedicated Japanese provider contracting team.**

Employers who partner with an experienced international health and benefits provider ensure seamless access to care that aligns with both their employees' cultural expectations and European regulations. Such partnerships not only provide critical access to care but also **demonstrate an employer's commitment to the well-being of their team**, building trust and confidence that extends beyond medical care.

Cigna Healthcare has extensive experience in supporting Japanese multinational companies operating in Europe. With a proven track record of servicing over 150 Japanese corporations globally[21], Cigna Healthcare has tailored its offering to meet the unique needs of Japanese expats. Our expertise in delivering culturally sensitive healthcare solutions aligns seamlessly with the requirements of employers aiming to provide the highest standard of support to their internationally mobile workforce, **ensuring that expats receive timely and appropriate care while adhering to local compliance standards**.

[21] GHB Americas and Europe Book of Business, July 2024. Subject to change.

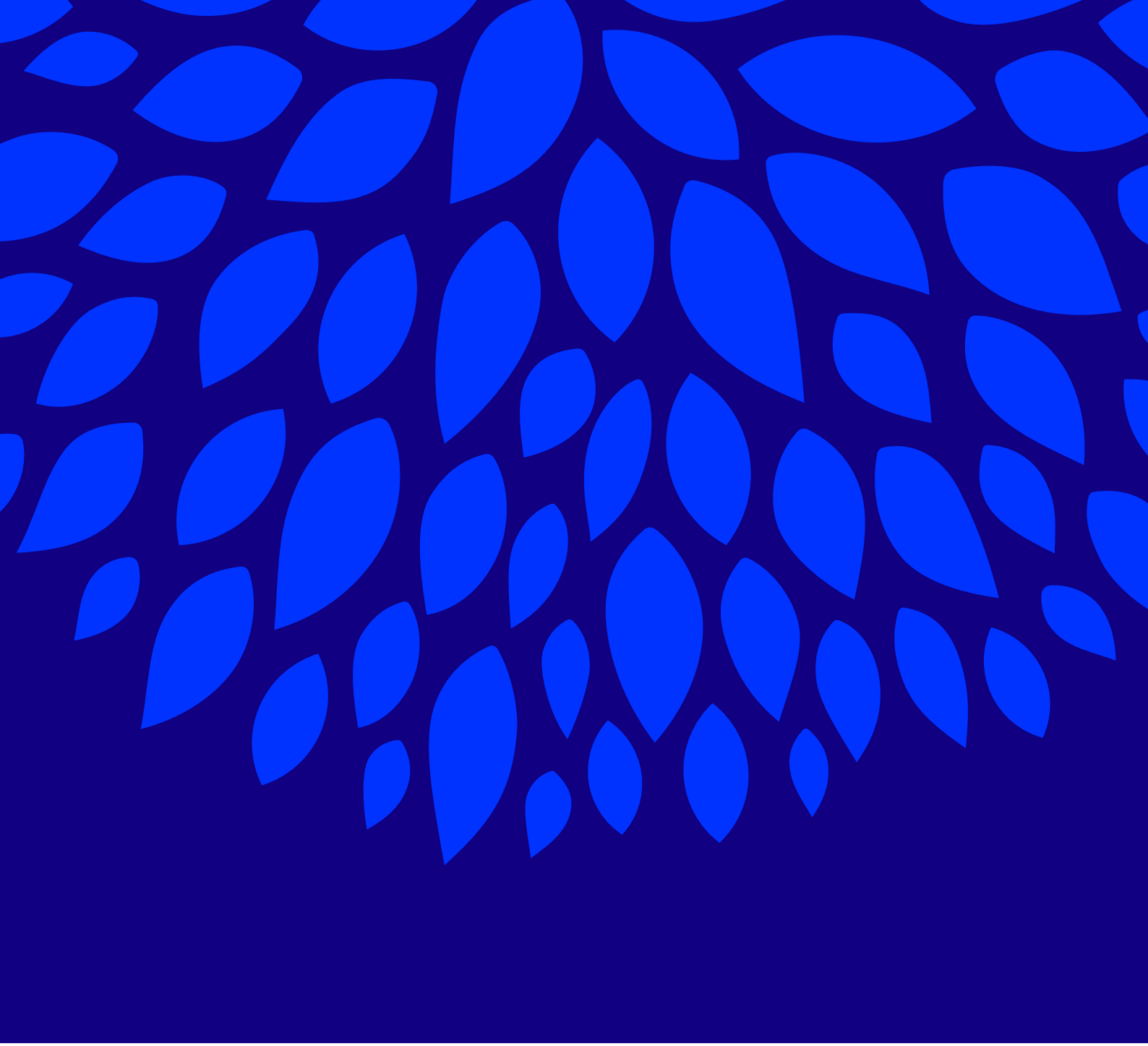
Conclusion

Adopting a culturally aware approach is essential for Japanese multi-national companies placing employees abroad in Europe. The success of any international posting depends largely on the well-being, productivity and peace of mind of the employee, and these aspects are directly influenced by their ability to access healthcare confidently and without unnecessary stress or obstacles.

To uphold their duty of care, Japanese employers must ensure compliance with key European healthcare and labour regulations, including social security, insurance mandates and local medical access requirements. Beyond avoiding legal and reputational consequences, companies must recognise the human impact: gaps in compliance or cultural misalignment can expose employees to real health risks and reduce their overall productivity abroad.

Ultimately, a culturally mindful and locally compliant international benefits strategy supports healthier, more productive employees and reinforces a company's reputation as a globally responsible employer. It's not just a legal necessity: it's a strategic investment in the success of the assignment and the long-term strength of the company.

Employers who partner with an experienced international health benefits provider can ensure that their globally mobile workforce have seamless access to care that meets both their cultural expectations and the requirements of European compliance. These partnerships do more than just streamline access to care, as they also signal a strong commitment to employee well-being. By offering culturally sensitive support, employers build trust and confidence amongst their teams, reinforcing a sense of safety and care that goes far beyond medical needs.



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