

Understanding B2B IT Services in Japan

A Practical Guide for International Companies

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Quick Reference: Common Frustrations & Solutions

"Why is approval taking so long?"

Reality Check: Decision speed depends on company size, industry, and organizational culture—not just nationality. A 100-person Japanese startup might approve your proposal in a week. A 10,000-person multinational (Japanese or otherwise) might take a quarter.

What Helps:

- Provide complete documentation upfront
- Respond quickly to questions
- Understand that multiple stakeholders need to sign off on B2B decisions
- Be aware of fiscal year-end (late March), Golden Week (early May), Obon (mid-August), and New Year timing

Reframe: Japan isn't "slow"—it's "careful." Think of it as "slow to decide, fast to execute" versus "fast to decide, slow to execute."

"Why do we need so many documents?"

Context: Japan's documentation requirements evolved from practical needs—creating clear accountability, protecting both parties legally, and ensuring tax compliance. When working across borders, this documentation provides exactly what everyone needs for their respective tax authorities and internal audits.

What You'll Need:

1. 見積書 (Mitsumori-sho) - Quotation
2. 発注書 (Hatchu-sho) - Purchase Order
3. 注文請書 (Chumon-ukesho) - Order Confirmation
4. 納品書 (Nouhin-sho) - Delivery Note
5. 請求書 (Seikyu-sho) - Invoice
6. 領収書 (Ryoshu-sho) - Receipt

Benefits: Clear accountability at every step prevents disputes and speeds up audits.

"Can't we just use DocuSign?"

Reality: Digital signatures are increasingly accepted, but registered corporate seals (hanko/判子) still carry legal weight for high-value contracts—similar to notarized signatures in other countries.

What to Know:

- Hanko isn't resistance to digital transformation—it's a well-established authentication system
 - For routine documents: digital is fine
 - For major contracts: expect physical seals
 - Adoption is growing fast, especially among younger companies
-

The Spectrum of Japanese Business Culture

Important: There's No Single "Japanese Way"

You'll find everything from highly traditional companies with paper-heavy processes to modern startups that could fit into Silicon Valley. **The key is understanding your specific customer**, not applying broad generalizations.

| Traditional Companies | Modern Companies |
|---|--|
| Still use ringi (稟議) approval systems | Use Slack/Teams-based workflows |
| Prefer physical documentation | Fully digital processes |
| Formal business card exchanges | Casual networking |
| Extensive relationship-building rituals | More transactional approach |
| Long decision cycles | Fast-moving like global tech companies |

Also Consider: Some foreign multinationals in Japan have more rigorous approval processes than local Japanese firms. German engineering companies and American pharmaceutical firms can be even more detail-oriented.

Decision-Making: What to Expect

The Ringi System (Some Companies)

Some Japanese companies use **ringi** (稟議)—a formal bottom-up consensus approval process where documents circulate through multiple management layers, collecting approval stamps at each level.

Key Insight: While this takes longer upfront, once approved, implementation faces minimal resistance because all stakeholders have already bought in.

The Pre-Flight Checklist Analogy:

Pilots don't skip pre-flight checks to take off faster, because the upfront investment prevents mid-flight emergencies. Once cleared for takeoff, execution is smooth. Japanese approval processes work the same way.

The Real Variables

The real variables affecting decision speed:

- **Company size** (100-person vs 10,000-person)
- **Industry** (tech vs pharmaceutical vs financial services)
- **Company maturity** (startup vs established corporation)
- **Specific organizational culture**

Best Approach: Ask your specific contact how their company's approval process works rather than assuming based on stereotypes.

Documentation Essentials

Why Japan Has Detailed Documentation

Historical Context: When I first arrived in Japan 35 years ago, everything was handwritten on pre-printed forms (*dempyo* 伝票). The honor system led to fraud. Today's documentation requirements evolved as practical responses to real problems.

Modern Reality: The market is shifting fast. Established systems like Bugyo (奉行) and Yayoi (弥生) are being joined by cloud-based platforms like **free (フリー)**, **Money Forward (マネーフォワード)**, and **Yayoi Cloud** with bilingual capabilities and API integrations.

The Qualified Invoice System (2023)

In October 2023, Japan launched a new invoice system (*invoice seido* インボイス制度) to handle dual consumption tax rates (10% standard, 8% reduced).

What You Need to Know:

- Registration is technically voluntary (任意)
- But businesses that don't register can't issue qualified invoices
- This means their customers lose input tax credits
- Creates competitive pressure to register
- Sparked political debate about small business burden

For CFO Questions: "Japan implemented a new invoice system in October 2023 to handle dual tax rates more accurately. Most businesses register for competitive reasons."

Relationship-Building Practices

The "Bookend Formality" Pattern

Japanese business meetings follow a specific rhythm:

Beginning (Formal):

- Business card exchange (*meishi kokan* 名刺交換) with both hands

- Proper greetings
- Saying "ojama shimasu" (お邪魔します - excuse the intrusion)
- Cards kept visible during meeting, arranged in seating order

Middle (Relaxed):

- Atmosphere becomes more comfortable
- Friendliness and mild humor work well
- Not expected to maintain rigid formality

End (Formal again):

- Proper farewells
- Thanks for their time
- Being escorted to elevator/door
- Bowing

Key Point: This "snap to attention at the bookends, relax in the middle" approach works better than constant formality or excessive casualness.

Beyond the Conference Room

Some of your most important business development happens outside the office:

- Dinner meetings (*kaishoku* 会食)
- Drinks after work (*nomikai* 飲み会)
- Golf outings
- Company events

Is this mandatory? No.

Will declining every invitation hurt your chances? Probably.

Evolving Standards: Younger professionals are less likely to expect extended after-hours socializing. The pandemic accelerated acceptance of work-life boundaries. But for major deals or long-term partnerships, investing time in relationship building outside formal meetings remains valuable.

Preparing for Your First Meeting

☑ Business Cards

- **Bring plenty** - You'll exchange with everyone present
- **Quality matters** - Use proper business cards, not home-printed
- **Bilingual preferred** - Japanese on one side, English on the other
- **Exchange properly:**
 - Present with both hands
 - Receive with both hands
 - Read carefully and comment/ask a question
 - Keep visible during meeting

☑ Timing Considerations

Best Times:

- Regular business hours (9:00-18:00)
- Tuesday-Thursday typically better than Monday/Friday
- Avoid month-end if possible (closing period pressure)

Avoid:

- Fiscal year-end: late March
- Golden Week: early May
- Obon: mid-August
- New Year: late December to early January

☑ Meeting Logistics

Punctuality: Arrive 5-10 minutes early. Being late is a serious issue.

Seating: Wait to be shown your seat. There's a hierarchy (senior person sits furthest from door).

Presentation Materials: Bring physical copies even if presenting digitally. Japanese companies often appreciate hardcopy documents.

Language: Even if you have interpreters, learning basic Japanese phrases shows respect:

- こんにちは (Konnichiwa) - Good afternoon
- よろしくお願いします (Yoroshiku onegaishimasu) - Please treat me favorably
- ありがとうございます (Arigatou gozaimasu) - Thank you very much

B2B vs B2C: Universal Differences

Before considering Japan-specific aspects, understand that B2B IT fundamentally differs from consumer services worldwide:

| Aspect | B2C (Consumer IT) | B2B (Business IT) |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| Decision-Making | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Individual decisions• Quick comparisons• Price-driven• Limited approvals | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Multi-stakeholder approval• Strategic alignment• ROI/TCO analysis• Formal procurement• Risk mitigation priority |
| Service Expectations | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Self-service acceptable• Business days response• Standardized solutions | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dedicated support channels• Rapid response (hours/minutes)• Customized solutions• Comprehensive SLAs• Detailed documentation |
| Relationships | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Transactional• Easy to switch | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Long-term partnership• High switching costs• Integrated operations |

Point: Many "Japan" challenges are actually universal B2B characteristics. Understanding this helps set realistic expectations.

Contract Considerations

Two-Tier Structure

Japanese companies typically use:

1. **Master Service Agreement** (*kihon keiyakusho* 基本契約書)
 - Foundation for entire relationship
 - General terms and conditions
 - Service scope and limitations
 - Confidentiality, liability, dispute resolution
 - Rarely changes
2. **Individual Work Orders** (*kobetsu keiyakusho* 個別契約書)
 - Specific project scope, deliverables, timelines, pricing
 - References master agreement
 - Allows flexibility for individual projects

Why Two-Tier? Reduces negotiation friction. Once you've agreed on the master framework, new projects start faster.

SLA Expectations

Japanese clients often expect more rigorous SLAs than you might encounter elsewhere—not because they're unreasonable, but because they're managing risk carefully.

Be Realistic: Missing SLA commitments damages the relationship significantly.

Data Protection

Japan's **Act on the Protection of Personal Information** (*kojin joho hogo hou* 個人情報保護法) governs personal data handling.

Required Documentation:

- Proper data handling procedures
 - Security measures documentation
 - Data breach notification procedures
 - Cross-border data transfer considerations
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Why Choose eSolia

We Bridge Both Worlds

The Challenge: Communication barriers create misunderstandings, and unresponsive IT providers don't understand urgency the way you do.

Our Role:

1. **Cultural Translation** - We explain Japanese business practices to your international teams and your business needs to Japanese vendors. Not just words—actual intent.
 2. **Bilingual Support** - All documentation, technical support, and vendor communication in whichever language makes sense for each audience.
 3. **26+ Years Experience** - Since 1999 exclusively serving business clients in Japan. We understand formal documentation requirements, approval process timelines, relationship-building expectations, and quality standards.
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Success Factors

To succeed with B2B IT in Japan, focus on:

1. **Understanding** there's no single "Japanese way"
2. **Attention to detail** in documentation (varies by company)
3. **Relationship building** that's genuine, not performative
4. **Patience** to learn each customer's specific processes
5. **Flexibility** to adapt to where companies sit on the traditional-to-modern spectrum

6. Expert guidance from those who understand both worlds

Contact eSolia

If you're ready to discuss how eSolia can support your company's IT needs in Japan, get in touch.

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Related Resources

- [Services Overview](https://esolia.co.jp/en/services/) (<https://esolia.co.jp/en/services/>)
 - [Company Overview](https://esolia.co.jp/en/about/company-overview/) (<https://esolia.co.jp/en/about/company-overview/>)
 - [Executive Team](https://esolia.co.jp/en/about/team/) (<https://esolia.co.jp/en/about/team/>)
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