As the number of foreign workers in Japan reached a record high of 1.08 million in October 2016, the Japanese government is making significant efforts to facilitate employment of foreign professionals with particularly high-level skills, in order to spur Japan’s economic growth and strengthen its international competitiveness.

“Highly skilled foreign professionals” are officially described as “quality, unsubstitutable human resources who have a complementary relationship with domestic capital and labor,” and “human resources who are expected to bring innovation to the Japanese industries, to promote development of specialized/technical labor markets through friendly competition with Japanese people and to increase efficiency of the Japanese labor markets.”

To promote hiring of highly skilled foreign professionals, the government introduced the “Points-based System for Highly Skilled Foreign Professionals” (PBS) in 2012. Eligible candidates are workers from outside Japan who are in “advanced academic research activities,” “advanced specialized/technical activities” or “advanced business management activities.” According to criteria such as academic background, professional career history, annual salary and so on, points are awarded to each candidate, and preferential immigration treatment is granted to candidates who score point totals equal to or above a predetermined number.

A conventional working visa does not allow the holder to stay in Japan longer than five years, nor authorize him or her to do a job other than what is stipulated in the visa. Beneficiaries of the PBS, on the contrary, have the possibility to extend their stays up to an indefinite period in some cases, and simultaneously engage in multiple activities that fall under different visa categories.

To take things further, the Japanese government is introducing a “Japanese green card for highly skilled foreign professionals” in 2017. Foreigners who are regarded as especially highly skilled will be able to apply for permanent residence after staying only one year in Japan, instead of five years as before. By means of these systems, the government expects to attract large numbers of foreign professionals who will play active roles in the Japanese economy.

Cumulative Totals of Admitted Highly Skilled Foreign Professionals and Accompanying Families, etc.

*The term “Highly Skilled Professional” has been in use since April 1, 2015. Source: Ministry of Justice
**Status of residence for employment**

- Bringing one’s dependent parents is generally not permitted
- Bringing domestic workers is only permitted in exceptional circumstances
- Residence permit has to be individually renewed in units not exceeding five years (e.g. five years, three years, one year)
- Only allowed to engage in the activities permitted under a single status of residence
- More than 10 years of residency are generally required before permanent residency is granted
- The spouse’s employment is not generally permitted

**Preferential treatment for highly skilled professionals**

- Bringing parents to accompany the highly skilled professional is permitted
- Bringing domestic workers is permitted
- Residence permit is granted for the maximum of five years (Highly Skilled Professionals (i))
- Granted an indefinite period of stay (Highly Skilled Professionals (ii))
- Preferential processing of entry and residence procedures (Highly Skilled Professionals (ii))
- Permission for multiple types of activities (Highly Skilled Professionals (ii))
- In addition to the activities permitted Highly Skilled Professionals (i), nearly all forms of employment are permitted (Highly Skilled Professionals (ii))
- The residency requirements for permanent residency are relaxed
- A highly skilled professional’s spouse is permitted to work

**Points-Based Preferential Immigration Treatment**

- Points are awarded based on educational and professional career history, yearly salary, and other factors, and a total of 70 points or more permits categorization as a Highly Skilled Professional (i). Highly Skilled Professionals (i) who have engaged in activities as such for at least three years can become Highly Skilled Professionals (ii).