



## COUNTRIES IN BRIEF ... On assignment in Japan

By Anne Dean, Editorial Director

Sending an assignee abroad? Then, the IGM country profiles should be of interest to you. This month we profile **JAPAN**

With the end of World War II Japan abandoned their military rule and put into effect a new Constitution, committed itself to becoming a peace-seeking democracy, and succeeded in relaunching its economy. In 1956 the nation's entry into the United Nations was approved. Since then, Japan has contributed to world peace and prosperity as a member of the international community.

Tokyo is Japan's financial, industrial and educational centre, as well as its official capital. Although it was officially proclaimed the capital in the late nineteenth century, Tokyo had been an administrative and communications hub since the 1600s.

To successfully do business in Japan, a foreigner must first have a glimpse into the people of Japan and the way they structure business. The most important aspect in the corporate world and society is hierarchy. The Japanese rank industries and the companies within them by status, performance and prospects. Once closely allied with the government, business in Japan is now dominated by the corporate giants known as *keiretsu gaisha*.

The heart of the Japanese decision-making process is *nemawashi*. Literally translated it means to bind up the roots prior to transplant. In business, it embodies seeking informal consensus for a decision before the formal arguments are made. It often entails secretly persuading people to your side in discussions outside of formal channels, such as after-work socializing. The naive foreigner seldom realizes that a topic may have been widely discussed in outside circles before being formally introduced at a company meeting. Not understanding the concept of *nemawashi* puts one at a distinct disadvantage in the Japanese decision making process.

Whereas Westerners identify most strongly as individuals, Japanese always see themselves as part of some larger group (i.e. company, country, family or school). Westerners relate as individuals who work together based on expressed mutual agreement. On the other hand, Japanese relate interdependently to one another whilst working within a context of unexpressed, mutual expectations and obligations. Differences in age, rank and sex – not emphasized outwardly in westernized companies – are openly acknowledged in Japan, forming the most important basis in interpersonal relations. In fact, it is safe to say that an individual is never allowed to forget his/her position. Even the Japanese language takes into account the hierarchical nature of Japanese society.

A Japanese corporation reflects the nationalistic ethic: one people with one common destiny. Employees are valued for their loyalty, though in recent years young Japanese have begun to job hop, many to foreign companies. Traditionally, an employee enters a company at age 22 and expects to stay with it for life. The work ethic stresses teamwork, adherence to seniority, decisions by consensus, job security and long hours.

There are many international companies represented in Japan, and most business people there are used to working with foreigners, at least to some extent. Always have your *meishi* (business card) ready. Have them printed in English and Japanese, and be sure to observe the proper etiquette of giving and receiving them.

Be prepared for meetings to be in Japanese. Bring an interpreter if one is not provided. Try to always be on time. It is amazing that in Tokyo, a city of 30 million people, punctuality is not only expected but achieved.

While conducting business in Japan, do not press for a response or decision from a colleague. The most frustrating aspect of doing business in Japan for most Westerners is that there are no quick decisions. The process of deliberation can seem endless, for almost everyone seems to have a say in even minor decisions. If you attempt to exert pressure, your clients or colleagues will most likely withdraw from you, verbally or even physically.

For newcomers to Japan, it is essential to understand the meaning of *keigo* (polite language). Polite language relates to the relationship and respect. Remember to use titles to recognize your colleague's station and contribution. Although the exact meanings of these titles are not the same in different companies, some positions are referred to as the same. *Kacho* usually refers to a group supervisor, and although it is not the leadership position, it is a very important nonetheless.

The lines of communication in a Japanese company are hierarchical, with most people reporting to an immediate supervisor (*Kacho*). When introducing a person in your office, you should not use their rank, and when introducing a colleague, do not add *san* to your associate's name.

Much has been written on the art of conducting business in Japan. Whether you work in a large Japanese corporation or a smaller, privately-owned company, you will find the experience often frustrating, sometimes exhilarating but never boring. Western and Japanese business practices are so different that you cannot help but have at least one new cultural experience every day.

Keep in mind that all business and social interaction is based on the Japanese concept of *Wa*, the all-important harmony. Its effect on every aspect of Japanese society cannot be underestimated, and successfully doing business in Japan depends on a basic understanding of this concept. You will generally find that inconsistencies in communication and management styles between European, Japanese and North American companies are based on the concept that the older (read: more traditional) the Japanese company, the greater the difference.

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In brief, Western communication style is explicit; Japanese communication style is implicit. Most strikingly, Japanese individuals rarely even place a subject in their sentences, which is left to be inferred by the listener. At first, you may need to ask a few questions to get the facts straight. Japanese nationals are not accustomed to giving all the details – the who, what and when; these are implied. However, vagueness and ambiguity are not necessarily negative attributes, but are considered useful for interpreting situations and avoiding conflicts.

It is also helpful for international executives to understand the Japanese concept of *Ma*. It translates as the space between words, and is the deliberate silence used to provide emphasis after a point has been made in a discussion. The Japanese place great stock in what is not being said, whereas Westerners tend to fill gaps in conversation. Get used to “reading between the lines,” as the Japanese do.

Two other important Japanese concepts are *honne* and *tatemae*. *Honne* translates as “true-self.” In Japan, it is said that not even one’s spouse can know his or her partner’s *honne*. In most situations it is better to keep your opinions to yourself. *Tatemae*, in contrast, is the “public self.” These are one’s publicly expressed opinions, and often bear no relation to true feelings. It is not unusual to have your ideas denounced in public only to be told by the same person in private that he/she agrees with you.

As many Westerners know, conflict and confrontation in Japan are to be avoided at all costs. Problems are best dealt with indirectly and through an intermediary. Behind the scenes power plays are an everyday occurrence and conciliation is always sought. To be strong is highly revered in Japan, but strength is respected only if you observe the cultural subtleties of dealing with conflict. The Japanese power of persuasion is not argumentative. One is quiet when right, and modesty and self restraint are highly valued. *Kao*, the concept of saving face, is essential in Japanese conflict resolution.

A foreign woman in Japan faces unique challenges. If she is in Japan to pursue a career, the hierarchy of Japanese business may prove discouraging, and a professional woman may find it hard to be taken seriously. Conversely, the forthright attitude of Western-style relationships can seem shocking or rude to traditional Japanese. Westernized women, so proud of their hard-earned emancipation, may have to adjust their independent demeanor. Yet, modern Japan can be a wonderful place for women, presenting career and social opportunities as exciting as those from your home country.