

Women in the Workplace

September 14, 2007

Published on Japan Inc. www.japaninc.com

Profiles of professionals

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In Japan, the 'concrete ceiling' as it's commonly known, is still a major stumbling block in the career trajectories of many women. Still a predominantly male-dominated society, it's not surprising that Japan, which rates seventh in the United Nations Human Development Index, only made it to 69th in the same report's Gender-related Development Index, and 42nd in the Gender Empowerment Index for 2006. Slow as it may be, change is on the way. Feeling the squeeze from all sides, including low birth rates and an ageing population, Japan's severe underutilization of women in the workforce no longer makes any good economic sense. What's more, many are realizing that the type of management that women can provide could well be the key to once more unlocking Japan's economic might. JapanInc spoke to four women who have enjoyed success in fields as diverse as government bureaucracy, business and non-profit organizations. They discuss their own experiences as professionals, and offer some interesting ideas on the future of women in the workplace in Japan.



Hiroko Tatebe may well have her ranking in her family to thank for her independence. "I wanted to try what it's like being 'Hiroko,' rather than being the '6th daughter of the Tatabe family,'" she says. Her plans met a lot of resistance from her very traditional parents. That is, until her father passed away when she was 16.

"He was president of a small savings and loan company at the time he passed away," explains Tatebe. "My mother actually became director, which was very unusual at that time, because she was already 52 years old—and that was 40 years ago!"

Inadvertently, Ms Tatebe benefited from her mother's new career, as she began to understand why her daughter wanted to study abroad. After being accepted to Whittier College, she moved to California, the state she is still based in today. She went on to complete a diploma from the Graduate School of Banking at the Bank Administration Institute and University of Wisconsin, and became a Certified Financial Planner through the College of Financial Planning in Denver, Colorado.

Her professional career took off when she was hired by the Dai-Ichi Kangyo Bank of California (currently Mizuho Corporate Bank of California). It was here that she fatefully began to develop her skills as a bridge between the cultures and went on to become Director, Executive Vice President and Treasurer for the bank.

Six years ago, during the process of a bank merger, the culture began to change within the organization. Ms Tatebe saw another opportunity for growth. "I always felt when I get to 50 years old then I should do something new, and that was the time, so I decided to move forward with a new career."

After some time searching, she came full circle, when she realized her skills as a bridge between US and Japanese cultures could also benefit women. "In terms of women and diversity initiatives, the US is more advanced, but at the same time, the US is still struggling, 40 years after the civil rights movement, there are still things the US needs to learn."

Tatebe became a founding member of GEWEL (Global Enhancement of Women's Executive Leadership) in Japan, and in 2003 they held an inaugural event in Los Angeles. "We brought 10 business women to LA and I organised workshops, which was very successful."

In 2006, she expanded her idea by founding the US-based Global Organization for Leadership and Diversity (GOLD). While the eventual goal is to widen its focus to include both professional men and women, and expand its geographic service area, for now it is primarily focused on the development of professional women leaders and their networks.

“The GOLD goal for women in the States and in Japan is to create a community, learn models from each other, then really exchange the best practices to the extent that we don’t have to say ‘this is Japan’ or ‘this is the US.’ Of course, we cannot do everything the same because the cultures are different, but the underlying concept should be the same.”

Tatebe views the development of global leaders as vital to Japan’s future, but despite Japan’s many years in international business experience, there is still little consideration given to the benefits of diversity.

“Japan needs to understand what global means—how to be a global leader and how to utilize a global workforce—that doesn’t mean only from all different countries. In Japan, the older generation that are still working now have to deal with the younger generation. Especially in IT, the younger generation becomes your boss, and how do you deal with it? That’s diversity.”

“Here in the US, when we talk about diversity, we talk about race and ethnicity. Japan is more homogeneous, but at the same time, there are so many different types of diversity— gender diversity is the first thing, so how can we start?”

GOLD’s start has been promising. The 2007 symposium, held in March in Los Angeles, had a diverse array of speakers, including Tracey Doi, Group Vice President and CFO, Toyota Motor Sales USA Inc, and Yuko Kaifu, Former Consul, Consulate General of Japan in Los Angeles. In addition, GOLD also hosts 5-day study tours to the US for Japanese MBA students.

Tatebe warns against a policy that hires women for numbers alone. “Numbers are important—you have to start with something. But we need to remember if women without any talent are hired, that won’t do any good. First, let Japanese women become aware that it’s very important to have self-esteem.”

Training programs will be the key to bringing out the best in Japanese women, and organizations such as GOLD can put women in touch with one another, particularly beneficial for women who would like to enter a mentoring program. GOLD’s plan, in Tatebe’s words, is not just to do something because it’s good but also to develop financial goals, which in turn supports economic exchange, networking and training. “Then I know little by little we can make a difference.”