



November 2009

Featured Article: *Understanding Cultural Differences When Working in Japan*

Japan is the vocational dream destination for many geeks. Succeeding in the Japanese business world depends on understanding and adapting to Japan's cultural idiosyncrasies. There's no way to cover them all here, but there are a few key points you should know.

Understanding Your Coworkers:

*Group Mentality - Your actions and the product reflect on the company as a whole, and the company's standards reflect on Japanese sensibilities. Appearances are important, and your appearance is the company's appearance.

*Hierarchal Organization - Get used to consulting your superiors. Make sure that you learn and understand where you fit on the ladder. Treat everyone with respect, but give extra respect to your superiors.

*Meishi - Meishi are Japanese business cards. It's traditional to exchange them whenever meeting a new business partner, and they're a little different than American business cards; the focus is on the company, rather than the individual. Make sure you don't cover any of the information with your fingers as you read it, then put it away and bow. When presenting your card, use both hands. Treat these cards with respect. Do not play with them, do not write on them.

*Personal Space - Some Japanese business people will shake hands with foreigners, but many are still uncomfortable with close contact. Don't pat your coworkers on the shoulder or invade their personal space in any other way. Don't blow your nose in public, and don't make any derogatory remarks, even about competitors. When you are around others, it is crucial to maintain a pleasant demeanor.

*Shyness - Being polite turns into being quiet in many cultures, but it is especially common in Japan. Don't wait for your coworkers to reach out. Be proactive and make connections.

*Unwinding - Many Americans notice the discrepancy between Japanese behavior at work and at the bar. The key is to understand what behavior is appropriate in what setting. So feel free to party with your coworkers at night, just don't take it as an invitation to act casual the next day.

Understanding Your Company:

*Gender Divide - Only 10.1% of Japanese women had high-salary jobs in 2005, according to the International Labor Organization, compared to 42.5% in the US. This is partly due to demanding work hours (some days are 15 hours long) that make it difficult to have a family and career at the same time.

*High Standards - Perfection is expected in customer service and product creation. Americans might expect a company to be slow when handling consumer issues, but the Japanese do not. Be ready to work hard.

*Verbal Contracts - Several companies don't use written contracts due to fears about Western-style litigation. Be sensitive to this when preparing for a new project.

Bottom Line:

*If you want to increase your chances of getting hired overseas, show your potential employers that they don't have to train you more than they would a native worker. But if you haven't reached that level, don't worry. Most companies are sensitive to the learning curve and will forgive you one or two faux pas.

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