

Bushido Girls

Japanese Women and Expatriate American Businesswomen in the Japanese

Workforce.

Richard Spann

The current Japanese culture is very masculine, as determined by the research of Geert Hofstede. Thus, few Japanese women have achieved executive level status in the business arenas of Japan. In Japan, women are 50 percent of the workforce, but only about 2 percent of managerial positions are held by women. In comparison, in the US, 50 percent of the workforce is female, with 40 percent of managerial jobs held by women. In Japan the culture and its slow evolutionary rate contribute to the obstacles career women face. Traditionally, Japanese women have been expected to deal with caring for the children, preparing meals, maintaining the home environment and managing the finances of the household. Japanese husbands have often referred to their wives as "the Minister of Finance." Most working women in Japan hold clerical positions. Each woman who gets married is put under pressure to resign and devote herself to traditional duties. The US also has a very masculine culture, but it is evolving faster than in Japan. As a result, women in management are more accepted. Also, American culture is much more open to families headed by dual career couples. The added income a working spouse brings in overshadows the break with traditional gender roles in the US. Even with 40 percent penetration into the management ranks, women in the US hold very few spots at the top. Some exceptions are US Senators Barbara Boxer and Diane Feinstein of California and Carleton Fiorina, CEO of Hewlett Packard. Japan also has a few female stars. The current Prime Minister has appointed 5 women to the cabinet. Hiroko Uehara, elected in 1999, is the first female mayor ever in Japan. Kiyomi Saito is currently CEO of 2 firms in Japan, after successfully heading an ISP startup. Ms. Saito earned an MBA from Harvard. Research has shown that

female managers have a lot to offer. Women tend to have a transformational management style, effective in the Japanese business culture.

An emerging trend in Japan is for college educated women to become expatriate workers in the US. The vast majority of female Japanese expats work in the American offices of Japanese corporations. A consequence of talented Japanese women seeking opportunities outside of Japan is that Japanese firms lose the benefits of their abilities, insights and ideas. Another choice gaining popularity is internet entrepreneurship. The so called cyberfeminism movement has germinated in Japan and spawned a growing field of web-based business ventures led by women. An article from Japan Today depicted eight female Japanese CEO's. For each, the internet has been an important component of the business opportunity. The internet provides a resource that enables not only commerce, but provides Japanese women with a means to build professional networks and online communities. Cyberspace is a realm that women have equal access to with men. In turn, Japanese women are starting to take advantage of the potential of the internet. The Japanese Ministry of Trade and Industry predicts that by the year 2003, 50 percent of internet users in Japan will be female. American businesswomen have also tapped into the burgeoning female Japanese netizen population. One example is the organization called Digital Eve Japan (<http://www.digitalevejapan.org/>). Part of the US based Digital Eve International, Digital Eve Japan provides an online network for female IT professionals living and working in Japan. The website can be accessed in an English or Japanese language version. Web sites by women and for women can best serve the needs of their patrons. The barriers to entry for internet businesses in Japan are lower than trying to establish a shop or

office. For women, the additional pressures created by the masculine Japanese culture are greatly reduced in cyberspace.

American businesswomen have and will continue to draw expatriate assignments in Japan. Despite the Japanese culture and business attitudes toward women, US expatriates can operate successfully in Japan. Again, the fact that most female managers utilize a transformational management style is very compatible with the Japanese business culture which emphasizes relationships much more so than the American business environment. Repatriation debriefings have shown that US women can increase their chances of success in Japanese assignments by having senior management send a letter of introduction to the Japanese location outlining titles, duties and level of authority prior to the start of the assignment. For the expatriate woman, it is highly advised to take classes in Japanese language both before and during the assignment. Also, the US businesswoman should take training in speaking styles, dress and behavior. The Japanese business culture has a different rhythm than in the US. Business days tend to start later. Negotiations take a lot longer because Japan does not have the same level of direct verbal communication as the US. In Japan, the most senior person present goes through a doorway first. No one is going to pull open the door and allow the females to go through first. Ironically, another reason that American expatriate workers have an enhanced opportunity in Japan over native Japanese women is that Japanese business men are more used to dealing with American women executives. Women sent to Japan on business assignments will have a productive, rewarding experience if a good foundation of cultural and language training is laid down beforehand.

Women have great potential business opportunities in Japan, despite the current cultural realities. One resource available to Japanese women is the internet. The entrepreneur, the professional lady and even the married woman in a more traditional Japanese household can use the internet to satisfy her needs. One option that women in the Japanese workforce have pursued is becoming expatriate workers in the US. The Japanese female expat movement has caused a bit of a “brain drain” for Japanese business. With a recession underway in Japan, businesswomen may have the fresh energy and new ideas needed to return the Japan economy around. Until the Japanese business culture and society make adjustments to encourage and accept many more female career women, Japan will miss out on the benefits that bright, talented women have to offer. American women doing business in Japan would do well to prepare for their tenure by first laying the groundwork with appropriate pre-introductions and studying the culture and language before departure.

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