Overseas

Overseas Returnees Face Variety of Obstacles

By KATHRYN BROCKMAN

After two years, Chihiro Suematsu returned to Japan from California's Stanford University, girded with a master's degree in business management that had been sponsored by his Japanese company. But, back on the job, he found himself immersed once again in routine work that consumed 90 percent of his time, while the remaining 10 percent was spent dilly dallying to put what he had learned at Stanford into practice.

Like many overseas returnees, Suematsu faced a dream in understanding of just how he could appropriately and effectively use his training while easing back into the rigid, hierarchal Japanese business structure.

"I wanted the challenge of work," he explained. "But challenge means risk and change, and Japanese employers, especially middle management, don't want either. They want to protect their positions."

Disillusioned, Suematsu quit the security of lifelong employment 15 months later at the age of 30 to join an American business consultancy firm. Now, he says, he is directly utilizing the knowledge and skills that had been financially underscored by his parent Japanese company — and earning a higher salary as well, enabling him to obtain his own apartment and enjoy his financial independence.

Photo courtesy of T. Kagawa

T. Kagawa, who worked for four years in Washington D.C., says that his overseas assignment made it easier for him to gain access to information useful in his business.

Suematsu's situation is not uncommon in present-day Japan.

'Re-entry'

Helping returnees overcome "re-entry" difficulties is a growing problem that Japanese companies still must handle in order to satisfy their financial investment, reap the rewards of their human resource cultivation and prevent a siphoning of capable, ambitious employees by Japan-based foreign companies keen to snap up motivated and trained local staff and willing to give them freer rein and higher salaries.

But the traditional Japanese social philosophy of hammering down "the nail that sticks out," plus the rarity of overseas pay incentives and home leave benefits are making overseas assignments less alluring as a career stepping stone. Developing effective business experts capable of dealing with Western competitors demands a commitment that, ironically, many Japanese companies themselves are unwilling to accept when confronted with their returnees' "Westernized" behavior.

Foreign Ministry figures for 1982 place 672,000 Japanese living overseas for longer than three months, a mere .64 percent of the then 119.5 million population of a nation that ranks as one of the top industrialized, though not internationalized, world powers.

Jealousy

Abroad, they battle the reputation of being "economic animals," while back in Japan, faced with silent accusations of having become "too Westernized," they must confront coworkers' jealousy, drop in status, loss of personal and Japanese business contacts and delayed promotions.

Such disadvantages, however, must be individually balanced against the rewards of enjoying higher living standards and a highlighted understanding of varied international issues and viewpoints.

"It's easy for me to obtain business information from high-ranking U.S. experts, and to arrange for visiting Japanese officials to be hosted in the U.S.," explained 41-year-old T. Kagawa (who asked that his given name not be used), a 15-year employee and staff advisor for a large Japanese company, who lived four years in Washington, D.C.

Some assignees work even longer hours than in Japan. As his company's first U.S. representative, Kagawa's first responsibility was to locate real estate property as a company investment. He collected competitor information, solicited business, coordinated visitor schedules and activities, and attended numerous obligatory social functions.

When he returned to Japan, he underwent "reverse culture shock," he said. His family moved in with his in-laws after living in a 600-sq.-meter house in Washington, D.C.; he commuted to work one hour each way on a packed train compared with an eight-minute drive in the U.S. in his American car, and he found himself the subject of office envy, particularly because of his direct access to top management.

The ability to weather the re-entry storm depends on such factors as piece of assignment (less developed countries pose greater difficulties for returnees cut off from up-to-date information), length of time abroad (long-timers suffer more Japanese culture shocks than short-timers) and depth of exposure to foreign culture (some Japanese live and associate as much as possible with other Japanese).

Older returnees with many years invested in a career, a higher position, and a family to support exert a conscious effort to avoid confrontations with coworkers.

"One colleague who had lived abroad advised me not to show my overseas photographs around," related Mamoru Shibuya, a 36-year old research engineer. "He said it would probably make others jealous."

Pointless

Some returnees frustratedly find themselves back in their original positions, while others are compensated with titular promotions with increased responsibilities but no accompanying financial reward.

"Returning to one's own department is also not always possible," explained Takeo Takahashi of Canon, Inc., "due to rapid changes in product lines and business conditions."

Such changes leave many returnees scrambling to catch up. During Kagawa's four-year absence, economic conditions had not only restructured and reduced his company, but forced others to reorganize so that former acquaintances were replaced with successors who were unfamiliar with him.

The ability to endure the long promotion process depends on a returnee's ambitions. With the promise of an overseas job promotion within 10 to 15 years, 39-year-old Aki Tamura, director of legal affairs in the Maritime Safety Agency, whom the ministry paid to study at Cornell University in the U.S. for two years, is focusing on the light at the end of the tunnel. "In the end I'll be able to use my contacts," says Tamura.

But for Suematsu, the slow, laborious climb up the Japanese ladder of success involves too much time for too little reward.

"The Japanese tenure system is too rigid to change," he explained. "In it, no matter how incompetent a person is, that system keeps him his job. But in a Western company, it's either up or out."

"After many years, my personal contacts will have risen up their own corporate ladders," predicted Shibuya, "so my knowledge now is being reserved for future use."

Photo courtesy of Mamoru Shibuya

Research engineer Mamoru Shibuya, seen here with his wife Yoko and their son Atsuhiko in Belgium during Shibuya's assignment in the European nation, says one colleague advised him not to show his overseas photographs to his coworkers. Doing so could make them jealous, Shibuya was told.

Kathryn Brockman

The Writing Works

Correcaminos

San Pedro Sula in Honduras is a sleepy town where service is customarily rendered at a snail's pace. It was July, usually one of the rainiest months of the year, though little rain had fallen during my two-week visit to this Central American country. Temperature and humidity soared into the mid-80's.

The music of chirping birds floated upward to my hotel room balcony overlooking the mountains of the Sula Valley, originally called Choloma Valley, meaning "Valley of the Birds." Here, large concrete buildings contrast with old Spanish colonial houses and streets. San Pedro Sula was named "City of the Thrush" because most homes have large yards with trees from which these birds trill their songs.

From May to November, brief, almost daily showers turn the countryside into lush verdant scenery. It was under threatening gray skies swollen with rain clouds that the hum of last approaching motorcycles travelled across the Valley.

One by one, the Correcaminos – the Roadrunners – of El Salvador raced up the driveway to the majestic Copanl Hotel, 60 burly-of-lead cyclists who had road-run 320 miles, over some of the most ghastly crumbling potholed roadways through three of the isthmus' most turbulent nations.

From San Salvador, capital of El Salvador, through Guatemala and north to Honduras' San Pedro Sula they had come, with a truckload of vodka, a suitcase full of Alka Seltzer and a Swiss bankroll to spend. For the semi-annual three-day weekend celebration, the local secretaries' association had been invited, and so had I.

"This will be the highlight of your visit," Tito Guzman, the hotel's general director, assured me with a mirthful Santa Claus laugh. He was a heavyset man, with a thick moustache, twinkling eyes and clothes that were always crisp at the seams. His passion was collecting Mayan relics, many of which were proudly displayed in a lobby windowcase.

The Correcaminos would also be one of the most challenging stories I had ever covered. I mailed a postcard off to my newspaper: "An American travel writer speaking Italian, in Honduras, with 60 El Salvadorean motorcyclists ... details at 11."

The arrival of the Correcaminos was not intended to be a quiet affair. A welcome banner stretched across the length of the driveway entrance facing the main highway for all to see. Another overlooked the swimming pool. Caricature posters in the outdoor glass elevator depicted roadrunners busy at drawing boards while a forefinger, a la Uncle Sam, pointed down the observer's nose stating, "The Correcaminos – working hard for you!"

The entire hotel staff had eagerly donned red, white and blue T-shirts that fronted "Honduras '83" and "Correcaminos of El Salvador" on the back – handsome souvenirs of an event that would leave many sighing with memories long after the dust had settled on the Roadrunners' trail.

The highlight emblem was a framed film poster of "Wild One" Marlon Brando perched on his infamous Triumph.

For North Americans, the appearance of the Correcaminos contradicted the standard international news photo image of short, emaciated peasants brandishing machine guns. The El Salvadoreans occupying the hotel – ranging in age from 25-55 and some of whom spoke flawless English – were tall, sturdy-built, educated men.

El Salvador and Costa Rica were the only two Central American countries largely settled by Europeans who left behind a legacy of European culture, money and property.

The Correcaminos were owners, presidents and managers of some of their country's leading industries. Most assumed reporters stretched facts to fit predetermined stories. Only four admitted their wariness of journalists. Many skipped talk about themselves and their work, a trick at which they were gifted, and changed the subject instead. Some brought up the heated issue of El Salvadorean politics while insisting the reporter not do so. Few allowed their pictures to be taken. They turned their backs, walked away or simply didn't show up as requested. Their tour organizer was unable to elicit cooperation.

They had come with a truckload of vodka, a suitcase full of Alka Seltzer and a Swiss bankroll to spend.

Their choice of the Copanl, reputedly one of the world's most luxurious full-service hotels, reflected their background and lifestyle. This gem of the Honduran tourist industry was ideally situated on the outskirts of the city, five minutes from downtown and 45 minutes away from the white sand beaches of the Caribbean.

Inside, the men held room keys and Cocos Locos, a potent drink consisting of rum poured directly into the eye of a whole fresh coconut, while outside, the curious enthusiastically and anxiously scrutinized the motorcycles rimming the courtyard.

The most popular choice of touring bike was the Honda 750, numbering 16 over 15 Gold Wings, followed by eight CBXs, eight Honda 500s, three Honda 900s, three Honda 550s, two Suzuki 750s, two Honda 400s and one BMW 750, Kawasaki 500 and Harley-Davidson. Most were stripped of accessories, except for two German-owned cycles. A VW van carried luggage and repair equipment and the accompanying pickup truck later transported two downed cycles home.

As tour organizer, Ricardo Jimenez Castillo claimed the eighth floor presidential penthouse suite. An architect who had helped design some of San Salvador's city buildings, he masterfully led the cyclists to their destinations and dutifully distributed the caches of vodka.

Doors banged open and shut in a flurry throughout the hotel. San Pedro Sula had been looted and burned by pirates, destroyed twice by floods and nearly wiped out several times by yellow fever in centuries past. Having withstood that, it would survive another visit of the Correcaminos.

The 60 cyclists belonged to a 200-member club founded 15 years earlier specifically for touring and visiting other parts of the world together. Yearly $60 dues helped defray cost of support materials. The club annually raffles off a new motorcycle for an $80 dinner tag.

Once unpacked, the Correcaminos swarmed into the lobby where, in between toasting, speech and acquaintance making, plans were reconfirmed for the next two days' tours. Most were interested in relaxing on the coconut palm-fringed beaches; others were there for sightseeing.

Honduras is one of Central America's oldest nations. Lapped by the Pacific Ocean to the south and the Atlantic Ocean on the north, Honduras was shaped by the Mayan Indians around

Rider