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All the rage 30 years ago, Japanese classes make culture shift

By Marti Benedetti

An emphasis on understanding Japanese culture to be successful in business relations — all the rage among Detroit-area companies in the 1980s and into the early 1990s — has evolved over time.

Classes three decades ago might have focused on the proper way to hand over a business card or the etiquette around gift giving. But culture classes now teach how to work with a Japanese company on, say, co-designing a product, said Rochelle Kopp, founder and managing principal of Chicago-based **Japan Intercultural Consulting**, which helps foreign companies work with each other.

"Three or four times a year, we offer a class in the Detroit area called 'Working Effectively with Japanese,' " she said. Her clients are often suppliers whose customers are Japanese auto companies, she said.

On the flip side, clients also are Japanese companies that want to help their U.S.-based Japanese employees understand American culture.

That's a switch from when U.S.-based Japanese consulting companies were hired to teach U.S. workers about Japanese customs.

From the archives: Detroit companies study Japanese (Oct. 14, 1985)

Glenn Mazur, president of **Japan Business Consultants LLC** in Ann Arbor, who was featured in the *Crain's* story 30 years ago, had one of those companies.

Japanese culture classes lost their popularity because the United States and the countries it does business with became more culturally diverse and savvy, Mazur said.

Additionally, Japan got bypassed by other Asian countries, such as China and India, as a low-cost producer of goods, he said.

Mazur still has his business, but it has slowly transitioned to a new specialty: providing expertise on Japanese quality metrics.

"As U.S. auto companies improved quality, Japan responded by moving its automotive quality bar up," he said. "As consumers, we all benefited from this" with higher-quality vehicles.

Mazur's company segued from teaching Japanese culture to Americans to teaching Japanese quality techniques to Americans. Two of the methods he has been teaching are Quality Function Deployment, designing products to meet the needs of customers; and Hoshin Kanri, the main component of lean thinking and strategic planning.

Mazur is working on writing new ISO standards.

Mazur, 63, who speaks fluent Japanese and some French, now has two employees; years ago he had three. He travels extensively talking about QFD and ISO to "give back, pass the DNA to the next generation."

These days, he said, Japanese quality processes "transcend everything. If you don't know quality methods, it doesn't matter how deeply you bow."



Linda Hagan: Walsh professor teaches MBA class on cross-cultural communication.

Linda Hagan, a professor at Troy-based **Walsh College** and chairwoman of its business communications department, said that because of how global business has become, there's more of an emphasis on all parts of the world, such as India and China.

"In Novi (where Walsh also has a campus), we have auto suppliers from India, South America and Europe," Hagan said.

Linda Lim, a **University of Michigan** professor of business strategy and a specialist in Southeast Asia, said the emphasis on Japanese business waned as Japan entered into two decades of economic stagnation starting in 1989. "Japan was not growing; it was not cool," Lim said.

She said that since 2010, Japan has been recovering because of several factors. Since 2012, it has had a pro-business prime minister — Shinzo Abe — who has been in the media limelight more than previous prime ministers.

"And there has been mainstreaming of Japanese business," Lim said. "It has not been Americanized, but there's been so much exchange between Japan and the U.S. that Japan has westernized itself. It is not so different anymore."

Detroit-area companies and their employees overall are more multicultural, Hagan said. To accommodate that, Walsh College has a student organization geared to international students.

"These students are living here but still close to their culture," she said.

Walsh hosts an international day with native food and clothing, and students can share their culture with one another. The college also has a international student adviser who helps foreign-born students navigate academic procedures.

Meanwhile, American students at Walsh can travel abroad for a couple of weeks to locales such as Latvia, Europe and Israel, where they are immersed in those cultures.

Hagan teaches an MBA class, "Communication and Success Strategies," that incorporates cross-cultural communications and the varied nuances in business practices.

"We emphasize writing and email using simple words and precise language so the meaning is not lost," she said. "In public speaking, we teach students to speak slowly and articulate their words."

Hagan stressed that distinct geographic borders are gone when it comes to business. "Students need to appreciate and respect people who are different than them," she said.

Kopp said her company, which she started 21 years ago, helps bridge the communication gap between Japanese and Americans.

Lim said Japanese culture in general has become more embedded in the American lifestyle in recent years.

For example, the Japanese way of living in a simple, decluttered environment has gained momentum in the United States. So has eating sushi and enjoying Japanese art and anime.

"Japan has become cool again," she said.

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