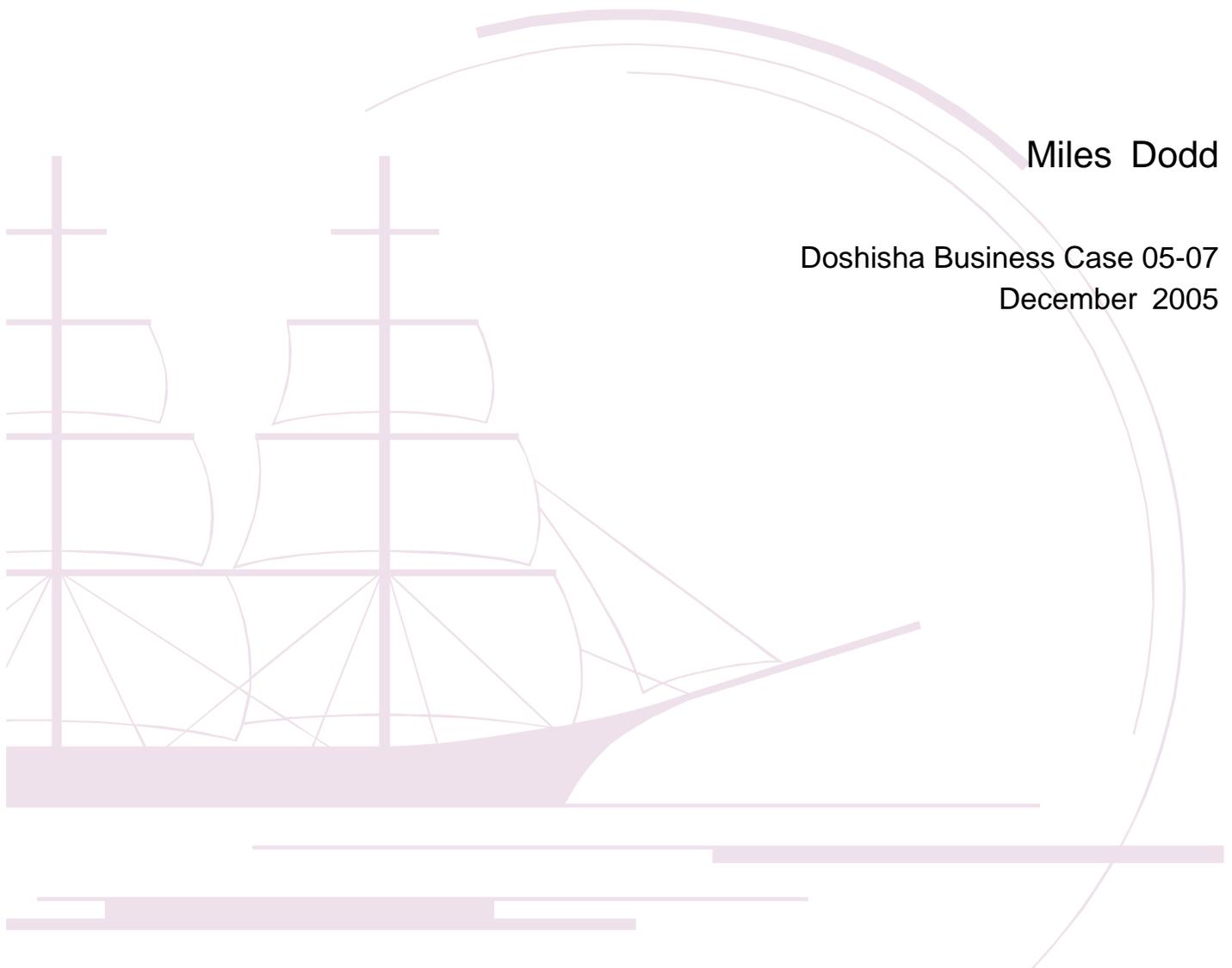


Rising Stars:

The Progress of Three Female Japanese MBA Graduates



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In May 1985, seven years after it had first been proposed, the Japanese government passed the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL) intending to promote better employment prospects for women. However guidelines implementing the law were only introduced in January 1986. A further act in 1991 expanded its application.

"Despite various shortcomings and slow progress, it seems that regulations have opened the door to change." ¹.

This case study traces the careers of three women who graduated from their universities in 1986, the year the EEOL was enacted. All three subsequently gained MBAs at Insead, the European business school based in Fontainebleau, France. They were all married, had one child, and were working as senior managers in their respective organisations. They were all in their early 40s.

Mari started work in a Japanese insurance company but moved to a foreign company in the financial service sector after the insurance company experienced serious problems. Harumi joined a Japanese bank on graduating from university, and still worked there. Yoko worked in a foreign chemical company in which she had been employed since graduating from university.

¹Philippe Debroux: *"Human Resource Management in Japan: Changes and Uncertainties"*, Ashgate 2003

Mari's story

"In Japan, many older people in the larger companies have lost confidence and find it difficult to deal with the problems of restructuring. The business environment has also been changing, and is now ready to accept people regardless of gender."²

Mari was brought up in Kanagawa prefecture, which borders Tokyo. Her father worked for a large Japanese corporation. She attended a private school and at the age of 17 went to Australia on an exchange programme staying with a family in Sydney; neither of her parents had been abroad so they were quite surprised at Mari's decision to go to Australia. The stay enabled Mari to improve her English substantially.

Mari entered Sophia University, one of the top private universities in Japan and studied international law. She graduated in 1986, one year after the enactment of the EEOL and started looking for a job: "Most Japanese companies were still very much closed to women wishing to enter at the management level career path, so I had a very difficult time." She had been attracted by an academic career, but her professor did not recommend it, saying Japanese academia was a particularly closed world and especially unreceptive to women. The legal profession was also very difficult, so Mari decided to look for a job in a large company in the financial sector, where she believed there would be relatively little discrimination, and entered a large insurance company which seemed to have a real interest in promoting females; 20 of the 100 graduates recruited in Mari's year were female.

The company had a rotation programme for new managerial staff and Mari moved from the president's office to the sales department and then to the actuarial department. She found that some of the older women resented the female graduates, but that the men were quite helpful.

The company introduced a study abroad programme and Mari decided to take the necessary examination for prospective candidates. Nearly all successful applicants went to the US, but the company suggested to Mari that she try for Insead in Europe: "I knew nothing about Insead, but looking at the diversity, it seemed attractive. The company kindly arranged for me to take French lessons before I left." My parents were very pleased for me and very supportive.

Mari found Insead very tough. After the stay in Australia her English had improved considerably, but she still found the debate type of discussion very difficult. At only 26 she was also younger than most Insead students and had little experience of business: "Many already had a very strong background in international business, and were strong in numbers and analysis. I asked myself what I was doing there! But my

² Interview with Mari, December 2003

group members were very supportive. There were no gender problems, which I found very refreshing." She learned to prioritise, and time management was vital. Looking back she considered it a very valuable experience.

At Insead Mari not only gained her MBA but also a husband. She said "My husband graduated in June 1989, six months before me. The six months together in a language school in Paris where we met, and six month over-lap in Fontainebleau, were a very precious part of our life. In fact we are the first Japanese Insead couple!"

Return to the working environment in her company was something of a shock. At Insead she had become used to having her own space, able to concentrate on the task at hand. Back in Tokyo the office was crowded; there was only one telephone in her section, and there was a lot of smoking. She found that she couldn't work efficiently.

Mari had been assigned to a new task force looking for new opportunities abroad where the company felt she would be able to contribute. Her colleagues had a positive view of her MBA but were not really aware what specific knowledge she had gained, and she confessed that she had the same feeling herself. The 'bubble' had burst and the company was not so strong financially, moreover: "There was something wrong. The company was trying to be very international, but the figures they were looking at and the projects were not appropriate for the company. However, I didn't talk about it; I was the youngest in the team, and the only woman."

In June 1999 Mari's company collapsed financially and was required to cease underwriting insurance policies. It was acquired by a foreign enterprise. Mari had seen what was coming and had resigned to join a financial enterprise which was also foreign owned. She found the atmosphere very different: "There are many people here with an MBA. This company focuses more on what people can do and what they can actually contribute. The aim is always to do something new. There is a big difference between this and my former company."

In the course of her work Mari often had to deal with the life insurance sector, one of the most conservative in Japan. When she went to a meeting there would often be five to ten senior male managers sitting on the other side of the table. While she herself was from time to time accompanied by a female colleague she said she had never seen a female on the other side of the table. To start with Mari was conscious of the age and gender differences, so was not very comfortable: "But after some time they became very friendly and we built up good relationships."

Mari's immediate boss was another Japanese female, while the top executive in Japan was American. The company had quite a flat structure, she herself spent about 50% of her time in direct business activities, and the balance co-ordinating teamwork and working on external relationships.

All Mari's subordinates were male; she found that she had no difficulty at all with that. As she put it: "Each person is supposed to do their job in line with their abilities." The company maintains a comprehensive appraisal system, including self-appraisal.

In her Japanese company there had been a tradition of senior and junior staff socialising together after business hours, however there was nothing like that in her new company, indeed company policy was to strongly discourage it. Should there be a sensitive matter for discussion, for example in the course of an appraisal, it would normally be sorted out in a separate meeting room, or very occasionally, over lunch.

Mari's daughter was born in 1991. Both sets of parents were very supportive of her continuing work. After two months Mari left her daughter in the ward '*hōikuen*'³ and returned to work. Although the childcare system was not well developed in Japan generally, it was then quite commonly used by women in her Japanese company.

If she had to stay late, her mother would go to her house to look after her daughter. Both sets of parents lived close by, so could easily help if there were a problem. Mari commented: "My husband's sister followed the normal course of being an 'Office Lady' and then getting married, but I think my parents in law actually rather admire what I am doing. In fact my own mother often wishes she had worked. I think the '*ryosaikenbō*'⁴ idea is going out of fashion now."

Mari's daughter was well aware from talking to her friends that most mothers were traditional housewives and stayed at home. Mari thought that she was sometimes lonely when she returned from school to the empty home, but that she was proud of the fact that her mother was working. Mari had few security worries about leaving her child in the house alone.

Mari had no help at home, and did most of the housework, although her husband would help from time to time. The family tried to take holidays together and to go overseas once a year. For their last holiday they had spent two weeks in the U.K.

³ Private or public day care nurseries for children who cannot be cared for at home in the daytime as a result of both parents working full time, falling ill, or having a family member who needs care or is handicapped, or other for good reason. They are based on the Child Welfare Act . For an example refer to the City of Yokohama website:- <http://www.city.yokohama.jp/me/aoba/english/hoikuen/hoikuen.html>

⁴ A Japanese expression meaning 'a good wife and wise mother'.

Harumi's story

"What has changed is that in the past women wanting to be promoted could not be. Today, if you show you are willing to take responsibility the way is open for you."⁵

Harumi's parents were both originally from Fukuoka in western Japan, and Harumi herself was born there while her father was temporarily based in London. He had joined a city bank and worked in branches of the bank in Kobe and Matsumoto in addition to Tokyo. It was common in Japan for a husband posted either overseas or within Japan away from his home base, to move alone leaving the family behind, a practice known as *tanshin funin*⁶. An important reason for this was often the need for children's continuity of education. However Harumi's father firmly believed that the family should stay together, so Harumi and her family moved quite often when she was young.

Harumi's mother was a typical Japanese lady - '*kimono ga totemo niau hito*'⁷. She always followed in the footsteps of her husband and taught flower arranging and the tea ceremony. She also took charge of all the preparations every time the family moved.

When she was twelve years old, Harumi moved with her family to New York and remained there until she was 15. During that time she went to a local American school, which many Japanese children also attended. She had changed school a number of times in Japan as the family moved, so was quite accustomed to it, however the new school in New York was not easy for her. In Japan, the model student displays *kenkyo-sa*⁸ that is obedience and modesty. Harumi quickly discovered in New York: "a positive attitude was everything and *kenkyo-sa* had no value". Her reaction was to contribute by representing the school in a New York mathematics competition, playing basketball and volleyball for the school, and playing the piano at various school events.

Because of the differing school years (the Japanese semester starts in April and the American in September) Harumi found that her previous classmates were a year ahead of her when she returned to her old school. She had become very proficient in English: "The English teachers found it difficult to handle me but I was very diplomatic".

⁵ Interview with Harumi, December 2003

⁶ *tanshin funin*: literally a 'solitary' posting, by inference away from home base.

⁷ Literally: a person who looks really natural in a kimono.

⁸ *kenkyo-sa* means 'modesty' or 'humility' - without *-sa*, *kenkyo* becomes an adjective.

Graduates from Harumi's high school would all go on to university. For so called '*kikokushijō*'⁹ Keio and Sophia universities were a popular choice. Harumi chose Waseda University instead. One of the most famous universities in Japan it has a decidedly 'male' image, or as Harumi herself expressed it '*bankara*'¹⁰. However beneath that image Waseda students were able and studied hard. She also liked the idea of Waseda since it was "very Japanese". She was one of only 100 women out of a law class of 1,200. Harumi said: "From a very early age I enjoyed being a single girl amongst lots of boys. Although my mother was a traditional Japanese woman, she always said to me: 'Just because you are a female doesn't mean that you need to hold back (in Japanese *enryo shinakute mo ii*) - you should always try to be Number One. Maybe it was because she had five elder brothers! That had a big influence on me." While her mother was an orthodox Japanese lady, she nevertheless encouraged Harumi to stand up for herself while at the same time observing the conventions: "In traditional Japanese society you were always expected to be *kenkyo* regardless of your gender, but if you are a woman, the pressure is even higher. For example you have to hide the fact that you are smarter than others, particularly men, so that you will not hurt their pride. Such a traditional attitude was highly regarded".

On graduation Harumi had no intention to work for a bank. Her father had held a number of senior positions in his bank and was eventually appointed to the board. He always returned home late at night, never dining with his children, and Harumi wanted to avoid that kind of life. However, before graduation she was seeking a job the year before the enactment of the EEOL, and despite meeting many companies she could find very few that were ready to receive women and treat them on an equal basis with men. Some of her university female friends had interviewed at one major bank but were incensed at the disdainful reception they were given. However Harumi herself met another of the major banks which seemed genuinely interested in not only employing women but giving them every opportunity to take management positions, and accepted the offer of a job there. For the first two years Harumi worked in the research department investigating the American banking system, she found it interesting but somewhat ironic that she was examining the US system before learning anything about Japanese banks!

After two years, Harumi was transferred to the President's secretariat. She commented on the move: "They were trying women in a series of different positions, and I was the first woman there. They were also trying to make the secretariat younger. When I joined, the people there were all men at the level of branch manager or deputy; they were all over 40 years old. It was tough for me; being a woman, most of the seniors looked at me as though as to say 'What on earth are you doing here?'"

⁹ Children returning to Japan after a period of residence overseas.

¹⁰ Rough or uncouth

Harumi's work in the secretariat saw her representing the bank at big organisations such as *Keidanren*¹¹ and the *Keizai Doyukai*¹². She said there was initial surprise at seeing a young woman, but "they soon got used to me". Her biggest handicaps at the secretariat were her lack of experience in the work of the bank and absence of personal networks in the bank itself. Both the head of the secretariat and his deputy had been educated overseas, however they were quite different personalities. Harumi commented: "The head was very conservative. He had no idea what to do with me, and even suggested that I go to an interpreters' school so that I could interpret for the president. On the other hand the deputy was very helpful and encouraging; he would delegate a lot to me saying he would take the responsibility if anything went wrong."

There was a process in the bank for selecting those who would be sponsored as students overseas. This involved an English exam followed, if you were successful, by interviews by the HR department and finally at board level. Harumi applied and was selected. Almost all successful candidates were sent to study in the US, however Harumi was shocked to learn that she would be required to apply to Insead in France - she was not given any choice. She had visited France twice, but did not have a very good impression. She had twice nearly been pick-pocketed, and found the people unfriendly towards non French speakers. The deputy head of the department took her to one side and warned her not to react negatively when she was given the news officially, "If you are a true banker, you accept every order impassively," he said.

The bank sent Harumi to Paris one year in advance to learn French. She had very much enjoyed living there on that occasion, and had already adjusted to France when she arrived at Insead. On the first day she was delighted to meet an even more diverse group of people than she had known in New York, however on the second day she was hit by a '*tsunami*'¹³ of work which hardly let up during her year there. She needed to spend a great deal of time studying which she enjoyed, but nevertheless regretted that she could not be more free to join in the social and networking activity. She was pleased to find that there was no gender discrimination. There was a great deal of interest in Japan, but coming from the financial sector, she was not adequately prepared to answer questions about Japanese industry in general, and this particularly frustrated her since she was the only Japanese in the class.

Looking back, Harumi said she had enjoyed Insead and had benefited greatly from the experience. She wondered whether two years in the US giving her more time in the programme might have been an advantage, but still felt that Insead was the best

¹¹ The Japan Federation of Economic Organizations - the main business association in Japan

¹² The Japan Association of Corporate Executives - the association of top business leaders

¹³ A tidal wave

choice since it differentiated her from the large majority of Japanese MBA holders who had US degrees. She found the Insead qualification of particular advantage in Europe: "Once when I was working in the international finance department I had to make a call to an executive in a large Finnish bank. It was very interesting that when he discovered that I was an Insead graduate the discussion went more smoothly and pleasantly."

On her return to Japan Harumi was assigned to a department working with the latest financial instruments. What she had learned during her MBA was of direct value to her.

One year after her return from Insead Harumi married a colleague from the bank. The bank immediately asked her for a reassurance that she was not going to quit. Neither her own nor her husband's parents ever suggested that she should stop working, and were very supportive.

Harumi's husband was due to be transferred to the London branch of the bank to work in the M&A department, however his mother was very ill, and the bank delayed his departure so that he could be with her to the end. When her husband left, Harumi also applied to be moved to London and the bank agreed that in a few months they would also transfer her. In the event she went a year later than her husband, not because of any pressure from the bank, who she said were very sympathetic, but because she herself was so committed to the work she was doing. In London she was the only expatriate in the syndications section. She enjoyed her time there and noted that gender was simply not an issue. Harumi stayed in London for a year, during which she became pregnant and had a baby son.

After the financial crisis in 1997/98 the bank sharply reduced its representation in Europe and Harumi and her husband and young son returned to Japan. Shortly thereafter her husband decided to leave the bank.

Harumi felt that the bank was making great efforts to promote women, even to the extent of introducing affirmative action, with which she personally disagreed, as she had told the bank's HR department. "Actually", she said, "there were very few women who stayed long enough to move up to important positions so it was difficult for the bank to find any women to promote. Nevertheless I opposed '*gyaku sabetsu*'¹⁴ since it would involve promotion of women less qualified than men and they would not be respected. The main thing is that men and women should be treated equally: if there are two candidates for a position the issue of gender should not be taken into account when deciding whom to promote."

Harumi had mainly male subordinates but found no difficulty in managing them or working with them, and did not think that they had any problem either. She felt that

¹⁴ Reverse discrimination

the old custom of seniors and juniors going out together after office hours had disappeared at head office. The younger people were no longer interested and preferred to go out with their own friends or to go home; it had become a matter of personal preference rather than an unspoken obligation. However she noted that, in the branch offices, there remained a tradition to get together in the old way, although she felt that, even there, it was diminishing.

When he was seven months old, Harumi sent her son to a *hōikuen* in the Tokyo ward in which she lived. The fee was means tested and Harumi paid Yen 68,000 per month. It closed at 6:00 p.m. and after that she hired a babysitter from a firm started by a Harvard MBA; Harumi commented that it was extremely expensive! Quite apart from the cost, she found it extremely difficult in practice to find any one babysitter who would be able to come every day and stay as late as 11 p.m. or midnight, feeding children and putting them to bed.

Harumi had a person to assist with cleaning the house once a week. Her husband returned home even later than she did, so was unable to give much help in the home.

Harumi was making steady progress in the bank and enjoyed her work. In January 2004 she was promoted to Deputy General Manager of the International Trade Services Division with heavy responsibilities. She was the first and only woman to be promoted to the DGM position in her bank, and was one of the few people promoted to the DGM level out of her 250 '*dōki*'¹⁵. She was conscious of the fact that, whether she liked it or not, she was a pioneer and role model for many women who would now look up to her.

Yoko's Story

*"Although I was thinking of university, I assumed that, at the age of 24, I would become a 'ryosaikenbō' - a good wife and a wise mother"*¹⁶

Yoko's mother came from a well-established family; her father was a senior manager in a large Japanese computer company. She was brought up very strictly - even after she started working at the age of 22 her parents would be angry if she arrived home after 11 p.m.

When she was nine, the family moved to Vienna and later to Bulgaria. Yoko was a bright student with good grades. She prepared all her work thoroughly, and was

¹⁵ Colleagues who joined the bank in the same year

¹⁶ Interview with Yoko, December 2003

always the teachers' favourite. Her English became so good that she recalled she used to quarrel in English with her brother! However on returning to Japan from abroad she discovered that she had fallen behind in the Japanese system, which was a real shock. She had to work really hard to catch up. The peer pressure made her always anxious to conform: "I never mentioned that my family had been abroad unless someone actually asked, that would have made me 'different', and I would have been thought a 'show-off' if I had advertised it."

Her best subjects were English and Japanese, but she was fascinated by science. Succeeding in the entrance examinations to Tokyo University, the most prestigious in Japan, she decided to study pharmacology. Many of the course graduates went on to do a master's degree after graduation, but Yoko was not attracted: "You need patience and sometimes get negative results. I realised that this didn't suit me, I wanted to deal more with people." Rather to her own surprise on finishing university in 1985, she decided to look for a job. The only alternative would have been to "hang around at home" and somehow that did not seem attractive.

One of the professors in the Tokyo University Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences was responsible for career guidance. Through him, Yoko was invited to interview at a number of companies. At a large Japanese chemical company the interviewer told her that the average retirement age for women was 25, but that at the patent department, which seemed appropriate for her background, it was 27 so she would be able to stay there longer. Yoko recalled: "Of course I thought about the '*ryosaikenbō*' model, but I suddenly realised how much I disliked the whole attitude, especially because he seemed to think that what he was telling me was positive!" There had been one foreign company in her professor's list, and Yoko felt she might have a more objective reception there. She was interviewed by the Managing Director, who was Swiss, and a Japanese manager. It was a fun, relaxed interview, and she accepted the company's offer.

For the first three years, Yoko's task was to register chemical products at the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) and the Ministry of Health and Welfare. Her boss quickly discovered that he could leave her to work on her own. Yoko liked the company but felt frustrated: "I am given all this freedom, and can decide how I want to do things, but there is no job rotation like in a Japanese company. My boss is 48 and will retire in 12 years. Am I going to be content to do this job for another 12 years and take his job? Probably not!" She started to ask herself how she could add value, and after talking to friends and family decided that she would try to enter the legal profession. She also discussed her future with her immediate boss who urged her to be patient, and then with the German Director of her division. He readily understood her need to have a clearer idea of where her career in the company might lead. He asked her if she liked the company, and she confessed that indeed she did. He

then disclosed that they were already considering her for management training in future, including a one year MBA course as part of a pilot global training scheme. Yoko thought about it, and did in fact consider a number of possible law courses. However, she had been greatly encouraged by the Director's active concern for her future and from then on resolved to commit herself to the company.

In March 1989, four years after joining, Yoko was transferred to the technical marketing department in order to give her some hands-on business experience before starting the MBA programme. Her clients were surprised to see her since it was very new for them to meet a female sales person. They were not unfriendly, but rather dispassionate, waiting to see how she would perform. She found that when her boss introduced her as a graduate from the University of Tokyo (a fact which she would have never mentioned herself since it would have been considered arrogant) it reassured them and persuaded them to accept her as a professional. Yoko remarked that this brought home to her the significance of prestigious education in the Japanese perception and the reason for the frenetic competition to enter the top universities.

When it came to her MBA, the company directed her to apply for Insead and she was duly accepted.

When Yoko told her friends she was going to do an MBA the only surprise was that she was not going to the US. At that time it was quite normal for capable staff to be sent by leading Japanese companies to take MBAs, but it was invariably in America (indeed some in Japan would say that MBA meant 'Managing Being in America'). However she was reassured to discover that one of her university friends had been to Insead and spoke very highly of it. Her parents had not heard of the school, but were very supportive.

On arrival, she found herself sharing a flat with two men, a Norwegian and a Lebanese. The school's intention was to mix nationalities, but gender was not a factor. She was somewhat taken aback at first, but soon got used to it.

When she had first heard about Insead she thought that learning French, an entry requirement, would be a real challenge but a great opportunity to acquire the language. She did not know what to expect from the course itself. She soon discovered that there was great work pressure and learned to manage her time and establish priorities, but not before suffering a series of nights with little sleep coping with assignments which made her lose concentration during class. Looking back, Yoko said that she benefited a great deal from the exposure to so many nationalities and to such very smart people. "It was easy to get an inferiority complex, but I got a lot of confidence from the fact that I survived." She also commented: "I learned to analyse and summarise things; so although I may now encounter many subjects and many problems, I know where to go back to; what the basics are."

Shortly after Yoko graduated from Insead her company abandoned the practice of sponsoring MBAs. The practice was stopped because it was dropped from the global pilot training scheme. Business units could send people if they wished, but with the concentration on profit centres and decentralisation, individual departments would be most unlikely to release someone for a year, especially their most capable staff.

Yoko returned from Insead to a staff function as assistant to the executive director responsible for projects and planning. Her colleagues now accepted that she would be assigned to responsible positions. In all, Yoko felt that being a woman gave her some advantage, yet felt that, if she were to make a mistake: "It would not be just like; 'it's this dumb guy from marketing again' - they would blame the whole thing on me." So she felt she was being watched.

Yoko had married some two years after returning from Insead. When her daughter was born in 1997, both sets of parents dropped subtle hints: "You could afford to live now just on your husband's salary," or "You should think about what kind of education you can give her". However there was no strong pressure put on her to give up work, and in fact were generally very supportive.

There was no precedent in her company for maternity leave. Yoko considered that from the point of view of her work responsibility, she could not be away for longer than four months. By this time people took it for granted that she would continue to work, so that was not in question, rather the company looked to her to come up with a fair and mutually acceptable solution during her maternity absence. She believed she had been a pioneer in establishing the principle that women should be allowed to take maternity leave, and later two women took more than one year leave after giving birth.

Of her dual role she said, "I know instinctively that if I mention problems, people won't like it, thinking 'Well it's your choice'. By adopting a certain manner or attitude you can make life easier or more difficult! It seems that there are certain ways of expressing things and certain manners which conform to the social norm. Some working mothers have a tougher time because the message is expressed in a less effective, if not the wrong way. Subtle pressure still exists in a way in Japanese culture."

In the ward of Tokyo in which she lived, the municipal authority provided a '*hōikuen*' child care centre which was a role model in the country, responding positively to the changing social environment. It was the first public centre in Japan to obtain ISO 9000 certification, and the first to open a night nursery. The centre opened at 07:30 and remained open until 18:30 with an extension until 19:30 and the night nursery until 22:00. The centre was open to any children both of whose parents were working and either living or working in that ward, however there was a waiting list. When Yoko and her husband spent a year in London they continued to pay the centre dues in order to

protect their place. Her daughter started there when she was only a few months old. There was a charge for sending children which was means tested based on parents' salaries. If she was on a short business trip Yoko's parents would look after her daughter, if on a longer trip, her husband's mother would come to stay. The ward also had kindergartens¹⁷ which provided actual education (which the '*Hōikuen*' did not) and which admitted children two years before the start of compulsory school. The government was studying a possible merger of the two systems.

Yoko drew a very clear line between her office and home lives. She would leave her daughter at the childcare centre at about 09:30, arriving at her office at 10:00. She would work until 20:00, picking up her daughter, who would have had dinner at the centre, half an hour later. They would then go home and play. Spending meaningful time with her daughter had become a real priority for Yoko. In times of heavy work pressure she would make every effort not to take work home, but would work late in the office instead.

Yoko had a helper once a week to clean the house and do the ironing. Her husband worked long hours so was seldom in a position to help at home or to collect their daughter.

When she started working at her company as a manager after Insead, Yoko managed staff who were older than her. It was difficult to start with, since they did not know how to position her, but she says that they got used to it. She commented: "I think I have a very logical approach to personal relations, but I also have a sort of motherly touch. So when I give appraisal and feedback, we are both very serious. If there is something which we cannot agree we just go into the details until we have an understanding. I think male managers sometimes have a problem with that. In fact such open self-evaluation and appraisal discussions are new to Japanese business culture, and are still not universally accepted by the current generation."

Bonding amongst section and department managers in traditional Japanese companies called for frequent informal after hours sessions. Yoko considered the practice to be outdated. While some young staff might have been interested, many wanted to go home or go off to be with their own friends. She commented: "These days the younger staff are getting more selective. They know what the boss is going to say and that he is never going to listen when it comes to the really hot issues, so that socialising is just a waste of time. I think the practice is declining. More selective dinners with a specific purpose, and either one-to-one or with just a few relevant people are now preferred and make much more sense." In fact as a senior staff mentor, Yoko was occasionally required to meet staff after hours, but they knew she had a child, so would only ask her to come if they had a genuine reason. Usually private discussions

¹⁷ In Japanese *Yōchien*

with staff would take place in a small meeting room within the office. She had no problems managing men or women. "When it comes to gender, I am not assertive: I don't make a point of 'being a woman'. Both men and women in the office say 'Oh, Yoko is different' and don't see me as a typical female role model."

"The company always gave me an assignment which challenged me to do more than I had ever done before". Yoko found her Insead experience particularly useful as her career within the company progressed and she faced new challenges. She was appointed managing director of a manufacturing joint venture in which her company did not have a controlling share and which it did not manage. It had once been efficient and profitable but had failed to modernise and now required urgent new investment and overall management revitalisation. The partner company was family owned and reluctant to make any changes so Yoko's company increased its shareholding to a controlling 60%. Yoko was a member of the negotiating team and was delegated to present the plan to top management in Europe. She was then offered the job as managing director in the joint venture representing her company's interests. After much anguish, she decided to accept the challenge. This was an immensely difficult task since the existing two directors, both from the joint venture partner, fought every suggestion of change. Three additional factors made her task more difficult at the beginning. First, the top management in her own company head office was completely changed only one month after her appointment: "There was a whole culture change." Secondly, unaware of the background, certain key managers in the Japan office of her company failed to support her in implementing new systems into the joint venture. She was forced to appeal to the president in Japan saying that she could not continue without the co-operation of the Japan office, and he gave full support, eventually solving the problem. Finally, Yoko was also a member of a global corporate project team at that time which required her to travel frequently at weekends so that after a stressful week, she would have to fly off to any one of a number of global destinations.

Yoko was promoted to line responsibility after her stay at the joint venture company and enjoyed her work. Every year she would take some family holidays, occasionally skiing, and endeavouring to spend the New Year holiday in Hawaii together.

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