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Evernex Japan keeps businesses running while helping environment

Company rescues hardware with support alternative

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Every year, electronics manufacturers invigorate their product lines with upgraded models of computers, smartphones and other mobile devices. For businesses, the pressure to upgrade is strong, as access to the latest firmware and software is essential for day-to-day operations. With each new release looms an anxiety that manufacturers will one day cut off support to older devices and restrict them from firmware updates needed to use the latest applications and services.

Despite its effects on technological consumption, production and carbon emissions, firmware distribution is often overlooked in conversations regarding sustainability. For Bob Van den Broecke, how-



Van den Broecke's motto is "All for one and one for all" from the book "The Three Musketeers," by Alexandre Dumas. HIROMICHI MATONO

ever, the fair distribution of firmware is a critical part of IT sustainability.

Van den Broecke's firm, Evernex Japan, provides IT services centered on the maintenance, reuse and recycling of electronic devices. As managing director, he frequently sees firms of all sizes dispose of functional IT equipment, including servers and computers, simply because newer models with more sophisticated firmware are available. With first-hand experience of how firmware-driven obsolescence perpetuates unsustainable practices, Van den Broecke is trying to spread awareness among businesses of how sustainable IT practices can not only help the environment, but also help their bottom line.

"We're not here to sell IT; we're here to sell the concept of helping companies reduce their carbon footprint and reduce costs," he said. "Businesses are being forced to change their equipment because the software is no longer being updated. This is a technique used by tech companies to force businesses to buy new equipment without providing any alternatives."

According to Van den Broecke, Japan has distinct hurdles in its path toward sustainable IT practices. The risk-averse, bureaucratic culture of many Japanese companies amplifies concerns surrounding manufacturer support and firmware access, he said. "It's incomparable to the rest of the world. Everyone is afraid to do anything if it isn't 100% documented, or if it isn't absolutely clear with everyone. It's like walking on a path and looking under every stone before making a supercalculated step forward."

Evernex Japan is growing despite these

challenges. This is in part due to the relationship between IT manufacturers and what Van den Broecke calls Japan's "dinosaurs" — industrial giants that are so big they can dictate their own terms. When one of Japan's behemoths demands a manufacturer continue servicing old equipment, the manufacturer, whose engineers have already moved on to new equipment, will ask Evernex to service this equipment on its behalf. Evernex Japan, which started as a three-person operation five years ago, will welcome its 15th employee this year.

Van den Broecke noted that regulations requiring tech companies to provide firmware support for older devices can help curtail wasteful IT consumption. For instance, last year, in response to limitations imposed by hardware manufacturers that curtailed access to updates and prevented decommissioned hardware from being resold, the European Ecodesign Directive introduced rules requiring manufacturers of servers and storage equipment to provide firmware support for a specified period after a product's release.

Other aspects of Japan's bureaucracy have surprised the 34-year-old Belgian. Van den Broecke's international background has instilled in him an unrelenting curiosity for new places and experiences, but his experiences living in multiple countries did not prepare him for some of Japan's peculiarities. In what he humorously described as "Japan's Bermuda Triangle," Van den Broecke recalled the conundrum of purchasing a Japanese phone, opening a bank account and finding a place to live: "You need a phone to get



HIROMICHI MATONO

a bank account, but to get a bank account you need a phone and an address, but to get an address you need a phone and a bank account. It was quite complicated, and a challenge, but that's part of what makes this job interesting."

For Van den Broecke, Japan is the latest stop in a life of international adventure. Born in Belgium, he grew up in Paris, where his father worked for Ajinomoto. When his father was assigned to head the Japanese food corporation's operations in

Asia, the family moved to Bangkok, where he attended high school and university. He returned to Paris and shortly afterward moved to Rome to attend graduate school for international economics.

In Rome, while searching for a job where he could use his language abilities (Van den Broecke speaks six languages, including French, English, Italian and Dutch), he came across the company IB-Remarketing, Evernex's predecessor. It was here where Van den Broecke met his mentor, Bruno

Born in Belgium, then a life abroad

Bob Van den Broecke is managing director of Evernex Japan. At the age of 29, he came to Japan in 2017, tasked with the mission of establishing Evernex's Japan entity.

Van den Broecke has led an international life since he was a child. Born in Belgium, he grew up in Paris, where his father worked for the Japanese food and biotechnology corporation Ajinomoto. When he was 11, he moved with his family to Bangkok, where his father was assigned to head Ajinomoto's operations in Asia. He attended high school and university in Bangkok before returning to Paris to obtain his license degree in administration and then moving to Rome to attend graduate school for international economics. He joined Evernex in 2012 and worked as a senior account manager in Hong Kong before coming to Japan.

He likes to stay active in his free time and enjoys racket sports, rock climbing and running.

Demolin, who was CEO. "I discovered the joy of working through him," Van den Broecke said. "He ran a close-knit, family-style business that encouraged entrepreneurship, and he was extremely giving." Van den Broecke recalled how his former boss once gifted him a scooter out of the blue just to commend him for a job well done.

Inspired by his mentor, Van den Broecke tries to diffuse this culture of close relationships and generosity among his employees. It is why one of his favorite expressions is from "The Three Musketeers," by Alexandre Dumas: "All for one and one for all." "It's not always easy, but when it is, I encourage them to enjoy it," he said. "If my employees want to work from the beach, I say, 'Go ahead, but make sure to send me a picture.' It's all about caring for each other and allowing people to have weaknesses and make mistakes."

A tale of two cities' castles, and how they survived the centuries

Satoyama ~ Authentic Japan

MAIKO MURAOKA
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Every municipality has a characteristic or landmark that its residents think of as their symbol. On July 29, the 18th Satoyama Cafe, an online talk session organized by the Japan Times Satoyama Consortium, hosted the mayors of Fukuyama in Hiroshima Prefecture and Kumamoto in Kumamoto Prefecture, two historic cities that have boasted famous castles for about four centuries.

Fukuyama Castle and Kumamoto Castle are beautiful partly because they did not manage to stay intact over the centuries. They have experienced hardships together with the locals and are living the ongoing history of revitalization. That is why the castles attract not only local citizens but also visitors and supporters from across the country.

Fukuyama has a population of close to 470,000 and is home to the largest steel mill in Japan. "Textiles are also one of our major industries, and Fukuyama is the top producer of denim material," said Fukuyama Mayor Naoki Edahiro. The port of Tomonoura in the southeastern corner of the city is known for its picturesque townscapes and sea vistas and was designated as a Japan Heritage site in 2018.

Kumamoto is blessed with nature. All the water its people use is spring water from Mount Aso, said Mayor Kazufumi Onishi. Its warm climate is excellent for agriculture, as shown by its production of eggplants and watermelons. The Sea of Ariake offers an ideal environment for growing quality seaweed.

What these cities have in common is castles that play a central role in building a sense of unity among the citizenry and creating connections with people from outside.

Fukuyama Castle, established in 1622, stands right next to Fukuyama's shinkansen station. "It is so close to the station that you can touch the stone outer walls of the castle in 15 seconds after you get off the train," Edahiro said. It is the last castle built in the Edo Period, making it espe-



The restoration of Kumamoto Castle shows resilience and brings hope after the devastating Kumamoto Earthquake of 2016. KUMAMOTO CASTLE OFFICE

cially valuable because it showcases the accumulation of technologies of the era.

Kumamoto Castle, built in 1607, is recognized as one of the three great castles in Japan, along with Osaka Castle and Nagoya Castle. Its grounds span 98 hectares — equivalent to about 21 Tokyo Domes — and more than half of the area is designated as a national special historic site.

Both castles have a history of devastation and restoration. A massive air raid in 1945 burned about 80% of the city of Fukuyama, including the castle. Edahiro explained that Fukuyama was targeted because it hosted a major army unit. The restoration of the castle was a symbol for the citizens of Fukuyama, who had lost everything in the war, in rebuilding the city and their lives.

However, some parts of the restored tenshu (main castle tower) did not look quite the same as the original. "Unlike the rebuilt one, the northern wall of the original tenshu was iron-plated for protection against attacks from the north side, which was more vulnerable than the south side," said Edahiro, explaining that the current renewal project, which started in 2017 and will be completed next year, the 400th anniversary of the castle, includes the restoration of the iron plating. The project is supported by history buffs from across the country as well as the citizens of Fukuyama. "As much as 60% of the funds raised via crowdfunding came from outside the city," Edahiro said.

Kumamoto Castle over the years has also lost a number of other build-



Fukuyama Castle, intended to be fully restored by next year for its 400th anniversary, overlooks the Fukuyama shinkansen station. FUKUYAMA CITY

ings in calamities, and they too have been restored with the support of both Kumamoto's citizens and people from elsewhere. The greatest devastation was caused by the Kumamoto Earthquake in 2016. "The total damage amounted to ¥63.4 billion (\$580 million), and full restoration will take about 20 years. Five years have passed since the earthquake, and we have only managed to rebuild the castle keep," Onishi said. But the city and its citizens are not giving up. Almost ¥5 billion — including donations totaling more than ¥1 billion from inside and outside the city — has been amassed for the restoration. Many teary-eyed citizens had applauded when they saw the castle — damaged but still standing — lit up shortly after the quake. That event was a decision made by Onishi, who was heartbroken by the sight of the ruined castle but believed people needed something to give them emotional support and motivation toward recovery.

Both cities are continuing to restore their castles and develop the surrounding areas to welcome visitors after the pandemic subsidies. "I hope that people will witness and appreciate the process of the revitalization of the castle too," Onishi said.

This section highlights the environment and a sustainable society. For more information on Satoyama, ESG and SDG issues, please visit www.sustainable.japan-times.com



ESG/SDGs

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Since 2017, the Champion of Change Japan Award (CCJA) has recognized female leaders who work to address the most pressing needs of their communities. An online event explaining CCJA and calling for nominees for 2021 was hosted on July 29 at the Venture Cafe Tokyo. It was moderated by the journalist Noriko Akiyama. Makiko Terahara — the top finalist of the 2020 award — and Masataka Uo, a member of the award selection committee since 2019, were both in attendance to offer their perspectives and answer questions.

The idea for CCJA began with its founder, Atsuko Toko Fish, receiving the Champion of Change award from U.S. President Barack Obama in 2013. Living abroad in Boston, surrounded by a ubiquitous push for progressive change, Fish wondered why Japan hadn't made similar strides over the decades. "I felt Japan needed a similar award to highlight women making positive changes," she said in a video message. According to Fish, CCJA's goal is not simply to applaud the achievements of particular women, but to shine a light on possibilities and encourage others to take action as well.

The CCJA is supported by the Fish Family Foundation as well as Tiffany, the world-renowned jewelry company. Each year, hundreds of women in Japan are nominated, and after a rigorous selection process, five are asked to give a presentation about their accomplishments, what drives them, and their future trajectory.

The 2020 CCJA award ceremony was held virtually in December at CIC Tokyo. CCJA



The 2020 CCJA award ceremony was held virtually in December at CIC Tokyo. CCJA

The grand prize, given in December, is ¥1 million (about \$10,000), while the four runner-ups each receive ¥250,000. All finalists also receive a commemorative crystal ball from Tiffany.

2020 top finalist Terahara

In 2020, Makiko Terahara was chosen as the top finalist. She was recognized for her work as a lawyer supporting same-sex couples in Japan who want to marry yet face legal barriers and cultural backlash. As the representative director of the organization Marriage For All Japan (MFAJ), she has been a passionate advocate for progressive legal changes to marriage laws in Japan.

Although she is herself heterosexual, she became involved because of her passion and determination to help others. She says she felt a responsibility to do something positive for a minority group. "I truly feel that not doing anything for people who are hurting — to ignore the issue because it doesn't affect me personally — is the same as advocating for discrimination," she said.

"I think what CCJA is doing has great value for Japanese society, and it was a true honor to have MFAJ's efforts showcased."

As for the award itself, "that is just the beginning," she said. "I've had many opportunities to network with the other recipients and intimately learn about the issues that they are tackling."

Passion and determination

Currently, CCJA is seeking nominees for 2021. "While only a woman can be selected, men can take part by nominating someone," moderator Akiyama said. Tiffany representative and chief sustainability officer Anisa Kamadolli Costa encouraged everyone to nominate someone: "Women leaders are all around us, and we all know someone to nominate."

Uo commented on the selection process: "We receive around 200 nominations, and the office screens them down to 25. Then we come together and have intense discussions to cut that number in half again. Finally, the remaining five give a presentation to decide the top award, so the entire process takes time."

When he was asked about Terahara, Uo explained that her most standout feature was, without a doubt, her determination. "When we interviewed her about her



The CCJA award recipient and top finalists with the selection committee CCJA

goals, she had a clear plan for what she would do if she won the award, and an equally clear one in the event she did not. Either way, she would be fighting for same-sex marriage rights with the same undeterred gusto."

What if a potential nominee is not already in a strong position of leadership? Can she still be nominated? Uo answered with a resounding yes: "What matters in leadership is not only magnitude of results, but also an individual's determination to make an impact as well as the ability to effectively manage available resources on any scale."

Of course, hopefuls should understand the evaluation standards on the CCJA website. But more than that, the selection committee must differentiate between highly qualified candidates. "To do that, we consider other factors such as what the award might mean for the recipient, how they would fit into the community, and their passion," Uo clarified.

Uo echoed Terahara's sentiment of the award being just the beginning. He called the CCJA a "double win" in that the recipients receive more than just a monetary reward and a pat on the back. Instead, they are welcomed into a community of other impactful women in the hope that collaboration can compound their impacts in the future.

"And besides, Atsuko-san always gives recipients a big hug! In 2020 it was a 'virtual hug,' but this year, she can hopefully do it the old-fashioned way," he added with a grin.

Nominations can be made at the following form (in Japanese). The deadline is Aug. 31: <https://jwliccja.or>