

sustainable japan

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Regional manager creates sustainability in style for average person H&M's Pokucinska seeks something for everyone

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Years in Japan: 1

Leaders & Readers

LOUISE GEORGE KITAKA
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

It is commonplace for executives to frequently switch companies as they climb the corporate ladder. Even in Japan, where lifetime employment was the norm for several decades, a growing number of people have more than one company name on their resume.

Aneta Pokucinska, however, found her ideal match when she went to work part time for H&M as a university student, and she has been with them ever since. She talked about her journey in the continually evolving apparel business and insights gleaned through her role at the helm of H&M in Japan.



"I have a huge respect for sustainability, so I think it's a sense of, how do we inspire our customers so they can also engage with us." COSUFI

On equal terms

The world's second-largest clothing retailer, H&M is based in Sweden and operates in 76 geographical markets. Like many young people, Pokucinska was interested in fashion, and so she applied for a position as a sales associate when H&M opened a new store in her hometown of Katowice, Poland. "I remember my first interview and the people I met. I came dressed up very formally — as interviews usually require — and the people were so open, so fashionable," she recalled. "I was fascinated from day one by the work culture, and fell in love with it. We use first names, not titles, regardless of roles or age."

She said that removing such barriers lets everyone operate as a team, right down to the newest members of staff. "This allows us to grow and contribute to the business, bringing all our potential to the table."

This sense of equality among the staff extends to H&M's operations in Japan, where many companies still place importance on titles and hierarchy. In visits to stores around Japan, Pokucinska is pleased to see that the firm is attracting young people who are seeking a more open and equitable work environment, which she views as indicative of a slow but steady sea change in the work culture here.

She considers herself fortunate to have worked with inspiring mentors over her years with H&M, both in Eastern Europe and at the head office in Sweden, and values her exposure to different markets around the world. "My biggest focus has been always to deliver the best results for the customers and the company. And then there's how do you balance the long-term and short-term strategies so that you can also operate the day-to-day business."

These experiences have helped Pokucinska hone her own style of leadership, and she takes particular pleasure in seeing the growth of her team members. "It's so rewarding to see colleagues thriving in their careers,

and when I have the opportunity to meet them again somewhere a couple of years later in a new position," she said.

Fresh challenges

Pokucinska was still based in Sweden when she began her current role in January 2022, overseeing Japan and South Korea as the regional manager for Northeast Asia. Visa applications were taking longer than usual as a result of the pandemic, and so she found herself leading her team remotely in a completely different time zone, before finally arriving in Japan in March.

Noting that Japan and South Korea are challenging and fascinating markets for global brands, she had had her eye on a position in Asia for some time. "I think working in Asia is a great experience, and taking the role here was the best decision for me. You can find great energy here, but it's also tough. If you just like routine retail, then this isn't for you," she explained.

Even though she has only been in Japan for just over a year, Pokucinska has already visited an impressive number of regions, including making the most of Japan's excellent snow on ski trips with her family last winter. A serious foodie, she loves trying everything that Japan has to offer. She is also enjoying learning about Japanese food culture and connecting these stories to her travels.

During a visit to Shizuoka, for example, her family took the opportunity to find out about wasabi cultivation at a farm in the mountains. She notes that learning more about such food specialties can foster a better understanding and connection with a locality, leading to a more sustainable type of tourism.

Shared impact

As an executive at one of the world's most recognizable fashion brands, sustainability is also very important for Pokucinska on



COSUFI

the job. H&M has set targets for using 100% recycled or more sustainable materials by 2030, and she says the progress is encouraging. Recent innovations include the creation of two plant-based leather alternatives: one made from prickly pear cactus leaves, and the other from grape skins, stalks and seeds that are discarded during the wine-making process.

H&M Japan has been collecting unwanted clothing from any brand and in any condition since 2013. Seeking ways to continuously improve, the company launched a new partnership last year with Osaka-based Fiber CDM, a major firm spe-

cializing in recycling used clothing.

In an ongoing commitment to encouraging people to make sustainable choices, the company offers a range of products created from a minimum of 50% sustainable materials, such as organic cotton or recycled polyester. In a similar vein, the recently introduced initiative lets customers who use their own bag, or bring any clothing to H&M's stores for recycling, to earn points toward shopping vouchers.

"It's a sense of, how do we inspire our customers so they can also engage with us, because when they do, we can make an even bigger impact. We can make a differ-

Progress: Poland to Sweden, Japan

Aneta Pokucinska grew up in the city of Katowice in southern Poland. She began working at H&M in 2006 as a part-time sales associate while studying at the University of Silesia in Katowice, before accepting a full-time role in visual merchandising a year later.

In 2014 she was appointed as head of merchandising for the East Europe region, taking on responsibility for five countries, and was subsequently assigned to the head office in Sweden as the global head of merchandising for the entire H&M brand in 2018. She has been in her current position as regional manager for Northeast Asia since January 2022.

For the past year, she has been enjoying exploring all that Japan has to offer with her family, particularly in terms of food and how it connects to local culture. She has been inspired by the managers who have mentored her during the course of her career, as well as by Rupi Kaur, a Canadian poet whose work focuses on empowering women. Drawing on Kaur's poem "Progress," Pokucinska said, "Our work should equip the next generation of women to outdo us in every field."

ence together," said Pokucinska.

H&M is also committed to making its clothes accessible to as many people as possible. "We use a diverse range of models in terms of ethnicity and body type — we have clothes for everyone," she pointed out. "I think we were also among the first to do collaborations with well-known fashion designers, making designer fashion affordable for the average person."

From the wide-eyed student interviewing for her first job to the seasoned executive heading the firm in one of the world's most dynamic fashion markets, Pokucinska has come a long way in her 17 years with H&M, but the desire to serve both the firm and its customers is still her first priority. "I want as many people as possible in Japan to fall in love with H&M! That is my goal," she said with a smile.



Care service Poppins helps women to live fuller lives

Unraveling Japanese companies

HIROKO NAKATA
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

When the care service Poppins Corp. was founded 36 years ago, gender bias was more explicit in Japan and women's equal rights in the workplace had yet to be secured.

"Our mission has not changed in 36 years: supporting working women," Poppins President and CEO Maiko Todoroki said in a recent interview. "Addressing social issues has always been our growth engine." The interview was part of a monthly series by Naonori Kimura, a partner at the consulting firm Industrial Growth Platform Inc. who specializes in corporate reform.

Poppins was the first company in Japan to train and dispatch "nannies" who provide families with what it calls EduCare, combining education and child care. This started in 1987, two years after Japan enacted a law to prohibit workplace discrimination against women.

Today, the top child care company in Japan provides 27,000 households with nanny and babysitting services, elderly care and nursery schools to support the needs of working women. The number of users more than doubled in the five years to 2022.

But the disparities between men and



women remain wide. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2022 ranked Japan 116th among 146 countries — the lowest among the Group of Seven industrialized nations.

The reason why founder Noriko Nakamura, Todoroki's mother and currently the chairperson of the company, launched Poppins is that a very basic question occurred to her after she quit her job at a national broadcaster and established JAFE, an organization for female executives. She noticed that more than half of the members were unmarried, and more than two-thirds did not have children. She wondered why it was so difficult for women to succeed in their career and have a family of their own at the same time.

Two years later, Nakamura started Poppins because she herself faced the problem of working while raising a child. The biggest problem is that the child care system in Japan was — and still is — not kind at all to part-timers and freelance workers.

Under the assumption that children have full-time working fathers, services for mothers with kids age 6 or below are largely divided into two categories: one for those who work full time, who can get full-time child care, and the other for those who don't, who can only get child care for four hours a day. Moreover, many people are not familiar with the idea of babysitters, and there is a strong social bias that infants must be taken care of by



"Our mission has not changed in 36 years: supporting working women," Todoroki said. HIROMICHI MATONO



Poppins President and CEO Maiko Todoroki HIROMICHI MATONO

their own mothers.

These factors have hampered development of babysitting services — Todoroki said that even where there were babysitters, they were either untrained or poorly qualified. That is why Nakamura started the EduCare service for preschoolers.

Poppins' history is intertwined with Nakamura's fight against tight regulations by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare. For example, nursery schools once had to be run by either municipal governments or social welfare corporations if they wanted a license qualifying them for government subsidies. Nakamura, running unlicensed nurseries, repeatedly requested the ministry to open up

the license. At last, in 2000, the country started to allow companies to get a license.

Poppins also geared up its elderly care service because Japanese women have long shouldered the burden of taking care of their aging parents, especially those who fall ill. Nakamura launched the "silver" business when her father suffered a stroke. "Even when women finish raising their children, they have to take care of their old parents. There should be solution for both," Todoroki said. "Her own problems were issues that our society was confronting. Addressing the issues leads to our business expansion."

"She had foresight, because that was not

the usual thing to do for women working 30 years ago. In those circumstances, she continued to think about what was necessary for them to keep on working," said Todoroki, who took over as president in 2018. She explained that the reason why Nakamura made Poppins a publicly traded company was that generating profits would make the business sustainable.

Poppins has pursued the quality of day care services ever since its foundation because of Nakamura's strong belief that they do not need to be a form of welfare, Todoroki said. That is why she made Poppins a company, which is harder than setting up a nonprofit. And that means the value of the company depends on the quality of the service.

To this end, what Poppins focuses on when recruiting nannies, babysitters and care staffers is their character and experience, not just their skills. "Since we take care of the lives of children and older people, we check such details as their risk mindset, hospitality, manners and way of speaking, which are not usually required in the welfare field," Todoroki said.

Todoroki said her mother's worldview extends beyond Japan, affecting her own background — she entered a private boarding school in Britain when she was 12 years old, graduated from King's College London and gained an MBA from the international graduate business school INSEAD. She also has worked at corporations in Britain and France.

In 2015, Poppins launched a joint study with Harvard University on how to cultivate children's non-cognitive ability to succeed globally, and they announced its outcome at an international symposium on infant education that they held.

Poppins continues to expand its businesses in child care services and education. For example, it plans to open two large-scale nursery schools in April 2024, with a total capacity of about 350 kids, at Harumi Flag in Tokyo's Chuo Ward, where the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Village has been removed and new housing towers for more than 4,000 families and commercial complexes are being constructed. Poppins

NAONORI KIMURA
INDUSTRIAL GROWTH PLATFORM INC. (IGPI) PARTNER



Established in 1987, Poppins has achieved business growth, holding "support for working women" as its mission. Its business domains of child care, EduCare and senior care

were created for this purpose. Its management style, centering on how to solve social issues, has been based on sustainable management since it was established. The market for such businesses was small at the time, but we can say that the founder created and developed the market with her strong beliefs.

Its business strategy is based on three elements: support for working women, high quality and profit growth. In particular, the company cares very much about the quality of its services. "The source of our competitiveness is how to impress the customers in front of us," President Maiko Todoroki said firmly.

In recent years, the company has taken various steps, including conducting a joint study with Harvard University and collaborating with large commercial facilities, to develop its EduCare business to the highest level.

As society becomes more diverse, I believe such mission-driven companies will tackle various social issues, develop sustainable management and build a sustainable society.

also plans to build two more schools by April 2026 in a large-scale development near a train station.

"If women shine, society shines and the world changes. I want to achieve this to make it one of the societal changes in the world," Todoroki said.

