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produced by The Japan Times Cube

Enjoi Japan cross-pollinates to grow garden of diversity

Roundtable

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Japanese companies often can find the solutions they are seeking if they let their employees flourish, according to Jackie Steele, founder and CEO of enjoi Japan, an edtech and “diversity and equity for innovation” business strategy consultancy tasked with finding ways to leverage diversity.

“Many companies often have in-house expertise across these unique little constellations, these individuals that bring the expertise,” Steele explained, and if they would only talk more with each other, they could find more innovative solutions. “It has to be a collegial competition of ideas, a collegial exchange of problem-solving together, and it’s more of a fun process — and that’s why we’re called enjoi, because the process should be enjoyable.”

Steele took time out of her busy schedule to sit down with Ross Rowbury for the 30th iteration of Roundtable by The Japan Times to discuss what brought her to Japan, cultural constraints to innovation, the service enjoi provides, and humanity’s future. Rowbury began by asking Steele about what motivates her and why she came to Japan.

A mind-blowing discovery

“My goal in coming to Japan was to be immersed in the language and the culture,” explained Steele. After studying Japanese in high school and majoring in East Asian studies and political science at McGill University

in Montreal, Steele had the opportunity to move to Japan and work in a local government office in rural Nagano for three years — “grassroots democracy in action that I finally got to experience, the best opportunity.” Steele was brought in by the local mayor in an attempt to bring in new ideas and find new ways to internationalize his local city. Steele began by providing cross-cultural awareness classes, and then quickly progressed into teaching and promoting human rights courses.

For Steele, working in rural northern Nagano meant she had the opportunity to experience the local culture, and quickly found that contrary to her expectations, the area possessed a great diversity of multiculturalism, family backgrounds, sexual orientation — cultural aspects she had always seen as strengths of her home country of Canada but had not expected to also be part of the grass roots of a local rural Japanese community. “It blew my mind,” said Steele. “All that diversity was part of the local community I was in, it just wasn’t talked about. It was a wonderful crash course in democracy.”

Leveraging what is there

Rowbury and Steele reflected on how Japanese society has a wonderful default to acceptance, but on the condition that you play by societal rules, and how a lot of diversity in families, marriage, ethnicity and sexual orientation often goes unremarked within the wider community. In Steele’s experience, it is the local level of government in Japan that deals with so many issues of diversity, and something she had the chance to experi-



Jackie F. Steele, founder and CEO, enjoi Japan COSUFI

ence firsthand during her time in Nagano. “I thought, let’s shine a light on that diversity in Japan and build the potentiality for leveraging all that wonderful competition of ideas, thinking and lived experiences — because all that is a driver of innovation and creativity.”

Steele didn’t just want to leverage this diversity in the market, but also for the betterment of democracy more generally. For Steele, everything about democracy centers on a vigorous competition of ideas, which must include a sense of safety, a sense of trust and the ability to create enough publicity for those ideas to be heard. “It’s important for those ideas to bubble up, to be heard, for us to take a 360-degree viewpoint to see what are the best ideas and the best solutions, and that’s how we can solution-forward for humanity, for our companies,

for all the products they are creating.” For Steele, the lens to see diversity’s ascendancy is best reflected by the policies and laws at the national level that build national distinctiveness. “We can see diversity through our cultures,” Steele said. “Cultures don’t just drop from trees. It’s created by our histories and our interactions with other countries, and in our policies and our laws.”

Bringing ideas to marketplace

The question for enjoi Japan is, how can we leverage this diversity to find more ideas and innovation? “On the whole, I do think Japanese people do have tremendous generosity of spirit to hold space for individuality,” Steele noted, but there is also a need to flatten out the organizational culture and remind everyone that they are all there to drive the mis-

sion of the company forward. It is important to build trust and ensure that colleagues are not “torn down by taking a risk,” Steele cautioned, “to know they have a collegial space to share ideas, to know they won’t be committing career suicide.”

Rowbury asked Steele about how she deals with the problem of some junior members of staff who may have skills and knowledge but are reluctant to provide input for fear of upsetting the perceived hierarchy. Steele explained that enjoi tracks internal diversity across 10 data points, often providing companies with an “ah-ha” moment where they realize they have not leveraged those diversities. For Steele, it is about what she terms “reverse mentoring” — up, down and across — identifying areas of expertise, core values, motivational values and experiences such as living abroad. “I call it ‘people-gardening.’ You first have to prepare your soil... and we want to have a variety of plants in the garden, so we want to have diversity and respect.”

Beyond the market

Rowbury and Steele discussed how employees today are always “on,” and for Steele, downtime is just as important for diversity as experience. “Whether it’s knowing people through your taiko (drum) team, your soccer team, your robotics competitions that you join for fun — whatever it is, those kinds of communities, there’s a huge rich diversity in doing hobbies, and it’s all part of the individual cross-pollination,” enthused Steele. This “me time” is especially important considering Japan’s aging society. Workers joining companies now will likely be part of the “sandwich generation,” squeezed between family commitments and aging parents, making it more important than ever that companies provide work-life balance to retain workers. With the advance of artificial intelligence, companies will need to have workers who can make decisions based on reason and judgment more than ever, a quality best found in a diverse team.



Steele was an associate professor at the University of Tokyo from 2012 to 2018. COSUFI

Hope for the future

Despite Steele’s faith in the free market and the competition of ideas, she can always see room for a fairer market. “It’s a combination of balance across legal interpretations,” she cautioned. These include “human rights and diversity and inclusion, and that politicians and the actors in the free market can’t get away with murder — you need some type of intentionality around risk governance, because the social safety net disappears for all of us if we don’t think about governing the risks of one world view controlling all of us.” Steele worries about our population becoming too worn out and distracted by work to watch these bad actors. “Governance needs to have regulatory oversight, and it’s important to really have laws holding the line through the supreme court to stop monopolies of polarization out of the parliaments.”

With enjoi now pivoting to go global, Steele hopes to work with thought leaders for more happiness, opportunity and diversity in the future. “My children swim in this water,” she said.

Roundtable is a monthly series of English-language events organized by The Japan Times Cube. For more information visit <https://sustainable.japan-times.com/roundtable>



As founder and CEO of enjoi Japan, Steele has guided corporate leaders in “diversity and equity for innovation” (DEI) as a holistic and evidence-based business strategy. COSUFI

Times Gallery - G7 special



Participating leaders from the EU, Italy, Canada, France, Japan, the United States, Germany and the United Kingdom gather in Hiroshima for the G7 summit. EUROPEAN UNION, 2023



U.S. President Joe Biden walks with U.S. Ambassador to Japan Rahm Emanuel after he arrived at Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni in Yamaguchi Prefecture on May 18. U.S. EMBASSY, TOKYO



French President Emmanuel Macron talks with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at their bilateral meeting in Hiroshima on May 20. TWITTER@EMMANUELMACRON



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy stands with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida at the Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima during the G7 summit. PRESIDENT OF UKRAINE | VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY



British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and his wife, Akshata Murty, stand with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and his wife, Yuko Kishida, at the G7 summit in Hiroshima on May 19. SIMON DAWSON / NO 10 DOWNING STREET



Clockwise from front: The U.S.’s Joe Biden, Germany’s Olaf Scholz, Britain’s Rishi Sunak, the EU’s Ursula von der Leyen and Charles Michel, Italy’s Giorgia Meloni, Canada’s Justin Trudeau, France’s Emmanuel Macron and Japan’s Fumio Kishida at the G7 summit on May 19. EUROPEAN UNION, 2023



Indonesian President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo meets with Prime Minister Fumio Kishida on May 20. He expressed appreciation for the Japanese government’s invitation for Indonesia to attend the G7 summit. PRESIDENTIAL SECRETARIAT OF THE REPUBLIC OF INDONESIA



Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva meets with Prime Minister Fumio Kishida on May 20. Kishida announced the government’s decision to take steps toward exempting Brazilian passport holders from needing short-term stay visas. RICARDO STUCKERT/BRAZIL

Ibaraki NPO preserves nature, ways of life in Shishitsuka area

Satoyama ~ Authentic Japan

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“I know! This is a Japanese dandelion, and that one is a nonnative one,” exclaimed an elementary school boy taking part in a nature observation walk held in the Shishitsuka area of the Ibaraki city of Tsuchiura, near Tsukuba. The area is blessed with nature, consisting of woods, bamboo forests, swamps and ponds that provide water to neighboring rice paddies, all well taken care of by a local nonprofit organization and residents — a perfect example of *satoyama* areas between wilderness and human habitats. In *satoyama* areas, both wildlife and people continue to benefit from natural resources that are kept intact by adequate human intervention.

The nature walk is one of the regular monthly events organized by the Certified Non-profit Organization for Nature Conservation and History Transmission of Shishitsuka Satoyama to nurture awareness of and love for Shishitsuka’s nature among young generations. Nobuo Morimoto founded the organization in 1989 to conduct conservation activities and research in the area, which faced the risk of extensive urban development at the height of the bubble economy. The group received the Satoyama Special Award last year from the Sustainable Japan Network, run by The Japan Times, for its contributions to the sustainable circulation of regional natural resources.



An instruction at a monthly observation meeting shows participants how to tell plants apart. MAIKO MURAOKA

About a dozen children and their parents gathered one Sunday morning in April to take a walk with an instructor who specializes in plants. Morimoto explained that the themes and instructors are different each time so participants can learn something new and seasonal. The theme for the month was to observe spring plants. The instructor handed a checklist to each participant and showed them where they could find the plants in the list. They enjoyed looking for the plants on roadsides, paths along rice paddies, empty lots, forest boundaries and along a small irrigation stream.

They compared similar yet different plants as well as native and foreign relatives, checked differences between male and female plants, chewed the edible stems of tawny daylilies and learned about the unique characteristics of various plants, such as why the young leaves of the “food wrapper plant” *Mallotus japonicus* are red. The instructor pulled out some tape and told the children to apply a small piece to a leaf and remove it carefully. The red came off the leaf and stuck to the tape. One of them looked up from a magnifying glass and said, “What’s red is actually like a carpet of very fine hairs on the leaves’ surface!”

While the group walked near some rice paddies, a group of young men in rain boots who are also members of the organization came by, saying they were going out to help a rice farmer. Morimoto said that supporting local farmers is also an important role of the organization in an area where aging and a shortage of successors is posing a major obstacle to the sustainability of local agriculture, like in many other rural towns in Japan.

However, the nonprofit is not giving up natural, organic farming for more efficient artificial and chemical-based techniques of farming. On the paddies they manage, they grow rice organically with a unique method that combines traditional methods and new ideas developed by Fukunobu Osaka, a former engineer. He moved to Ibaraki Prefecture to work for a research institute long ago and stayed there after retirement. His curiosity and ingenuity are now directed at how to grow rice more efficiently in organic ways while contributing to the enhancement of bio-



Rice planting by teachers, parents and children at the school rice fields SHISHITSUKA

diversity in and around the rice paddies. “I keep experimenting to improve my method every year,” he said with a hoe in his hand.

For the benefit of the members and supporters of the organization, as well as those who participate in various events and activities like the nature walks, the organization has renovated a century-old traditional house that stood on the roadside right next to the rice paddies. “The initial purpose was to make a small utility space with a bathroom, because there was no place where we could get changed or wash our hands. But as we worked on the renovation plan, we came to realize that this house is worth much more than that,” Morimoto said.

They turned about half of the space into a back room with a small kitchen and a bathroom, and the other half into a meeting place where not only members and participants but also neighbors and visitors can socialize.

The nonprofit raised more than ¥3 million (\$22,000) through a crowdfunding campaign for the renovation last year. Some of the work, such as making mud walls, was done in workshop style, gathering local people including children. The house, named Hyakunen-tei, meaning “100-year home,” will continue to watch over the community for generations to come.

The Sustainable Japan Award commends individuals, companies and organizations who have made advances in sustainable efforts. To learn more, scan the QR code.

