

sustainable japan

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Businesswomen challenge selves at ICWB conference

ESG/SDGs

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On the morning of July 9, more than 1,000 people from around the world gathered online for the International Conference for Women in Business (ICWB). Male participation at this annual event was a record-high 25%. Kaori Sasaki, founder and CEO of diversity consultancy Ewoman Inc. and communications consultancy Unicul International Inc., created the ICWB originally for working women to connect and learn from each other. Now in its 28th year, the ICWB is one of the largest annual diversity conferences in Japan.

The conference has been held every year, even when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the nation. The 25th, 26th and 27th ICWBs were held entirely online, offering participants the same excitement and insights.

This year, for the first time, the conference is divided into two parts: the 10-hour online conference in July, followed by a face-to-face get-together to be held in August. Both feature simultaneous interpretation in English, with experts in various fields invited from around the world to share their knowledge and experience to help participants broaden their perspectives and take on new challenges.

Personal challenges

The conference is given a different theme every year, and this year's is "I Challenge," as in "I challenge myself to..." Sasaki started the event by saying that the theme deliberately is not a complete sentence. "I hope every one of you will be able to find a word that completes your sentence and be aware of what you want to achieve," she said, adding that she wanted everyone to "focus on how one can contribute to society" by thinking about ways to grow and engage with other people in order to make an impact in the era of diversity.

Sasaki said people tend to expect big organizations like governments and companies to create new frameworks to bring about change. "But to make the frameworks function as they should, it is important that each one of us has the attitude and know-how to communicate and contribute our own experiences and perspectives within the frameworks," she said.

With this clear shared purpose in mind, the morning session started with a speech by Keiko Honda that was especially inspiring for youths. She serves as an adjunct professor at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs and as a board member at several companies. In her earlier career, she was the first female senior partner in Asia at McKinsey & Co. before she was appointed as the CEO of the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency, part of the World Bank Group.

She spoke about how she shaped her career based more on her assessment of what needed to be done and what skills she needed to acquire to meet those needs, rather than merely on what she could do or wanted to do. Learning has always been part of every stage of her career. "I have been studying various things such as the background of the Japanese corporate governance code, which may be useful for my job as an outside director, since I was appointed as one for the first time in 2020," she said. "I am aware that one of the reasons why I was offered the position was because I am a woman. So if I fail to do well, I would be taking away opportunities from fellow women of younger generations."

The second speaker, Minoru Takao, executive producer and anchor of NHK World-Japan, joined the event from the hustle and bustle of Times Square in New York, a place she called the symbol of diversity. She talked about the current movement on Broadway to change its long-standing culture favoring men and white performers, both on stage and behind the scenes, to a more diversified one that embraces different backgrounds and perspectives. She said, "Theatrical works need to arouse the audience's sympathy and interest" to be watched and make an impact on people's lives. To do that, staying in tune with the changing society is a must, but not enough. She stressed that creators need to take the initiative in changing society through entertainment, and audiences should support such change.

Saving water, adjusting boards
Speeches by three other female speakers followed. Kilimo Chief Operating Officer and co-founder Tatiana Malvasio, from Argentina, gave a presentation about Kilimo's business of helping farmers save water using artificial intelligence and simultaneously helping companies, including major information technology firms, which use vast quantities of water to cool their servers, achieve their goals of water neutrality by having them purchase the same amount of water as that saved by the farmers.

Shie Lundberg, director of the Corporate Engineering Program Management Office at Google, talked about how to foster team excellence based on her ample experience in leading teams of different sizes and nationalities. Betsy Berkhemer-Credaire, CEO of 50/50 Women on Boards, talked about the recent progress in the United States regarding gender balance and diversity on corporate boards, and suggested that the simplest and quickest way to achieve an equal percentage of men and women on boards would be to add more seats for women instead of waiting for men to retire or step down.

The president and CEO of NEC Corp., Takayuki Morita, and Sasaki took over the topic of corporate diversity. NEC, a major Japanese IT and electronics company, is the global leader in facial recognition. "Engaging people from different backgrounds — not limited to women — in a decision-making process is immensely important because talking only with people who share a lot in common will create blind spots, which could be a tremendous risk for a company," he said. Sasaki agreed, saying, "Engaging women will bring about new perspectives for management. The same is true for having more foreigners around."

Morita also pointed out that one of the purposes of mergers and acquisitions is to maximize the benefits of diversity. But at the same time, he stressed the impor-

portance of having shared rules of communication and decision-making, Sasaki said. Midcareer recruitment is similar — hiring people who have worked for other companies can bring positive differences. "It will be such a loss if we don't make the most of whatever they bring with them," she said.

During an hourlong lunch break, the participants were randomly divided into groups of four or five to enjoy an online networking session, then reshuffled so they could meet and talk with more people.

Filling the gender gap

The afternoon session started with a series of speeches from Japanese policymakers followed by four talks by corporate executives, a lawyer, a leader of an international organization, and a sports journalist and athlete.

One of the talks was themed "Women and Profitability." The discussion was moderated by Asako Aoyama, a senior vice president at NEC, who started the session by sharing some data that showed that "more diverse companies are likely to experience better, higher profitability than the least diverse companies."

MPOWER Partners Fund General Partner Kathy Matsui supported this assertion by sharing more data from the United States and Japan. She went on to say that a similar but more extreme phenomenon is happening in Japan's startup arena. "Although the sample size is small, [of] about 230 companies that did IPOs (initial public offerings) during the years 2020 and 2021, companies founded by women tended to raise 44% less capital than male-founded startups," Matsui said. "But relative to each yen of capital raised, the average market capitalization at the time of IPO for the female-founded companies was, surprisingly, 32% larger." She also pointed out that the average amount of sales generated in the IPO year was 20% higher for female-founded companies than male-founded companies. "We may be missing huge opportunities in Japan, particularly in the startup ecosystem," she said.

LinkedIn Japan Country Manager Wakana Tanaka spoke about the company's success in rapidly filling an internal gender gap. Only 25% of the leadership roles were held by women at LinkedIn on a global scale in 2016, but now about half of them are held by women, and the annual turnover has grown by 600% in the last five years.

She said that one of the methods used to accelerate the change was to shift to skill-based recruitment. "Disregarding candidates' experiences and how long they stayed in previous companies and focusing only on skills increased a potential talent pool by 17 times, including eight times more female candidates," she said.

Tipping point is 20%

Mitsuru Claire Chino, a managing executive officer at Itochu Corp. and an attorney in California, shared data showing that merely increasing the number of women in a company does not automatically result in more innovation. "The data explains that when the percentage of women in managerial positions exceeds 20%, innovations accelerate drastically," she said. "This proves that the key to improve profitability is to engage diverse talents in decision-making and include their opinions in the management."

After Moriko Takahashi, a baton twirler at Cirque du Soleil still in her costume from the day's performance, spoke from a theater in Las Vegas about the challenges she faces as a performer, five roundtable discussions were held in parallel — two in English and three in Japanese.

One of the English discussions was themed "Inspiring Entrepreneurs," where Hami Kim, the CEO of Kooky, a global entertainment platform, and Sarah Liu, the



Kaori Sasaki, founder and CEO of Ewoman Inc., founder and executive producer of the International Conference for Women in Business and inventor of Ewoman's Diversity Index ICWB

managing director of The Dream Collective, a global diversity, equity and inclusion consultancy, talked about their experiences as startups.

Both shared a career history of having started their business to solve problems they faced — as an artist struggling to make a living in music in Kim's case, and as an ambitious marketer confronted by the lack of diversity while climbing up the corporate ladder in Liu's case.

Kooky now has more than a million monthly active users, providing additional value to both artists and fans by offering them new ways of interaction and changing the conventional music industry in South Korea.

Liu is helping over 140 enterprises and organizations in 18 locations around the world go beyond what she calls the "artificial harmony" of merely going along with the concept of diversity, guiding them to believe

and invest in it.

In the Q&A session, Kim and Liu provided concrete answers on where and how entrepreneurs can get the help they want, and the benefits of having the right people around oneself, including a co-founder to reinforce the drive for success.



networking session — this time divided according to age groups — to share their learning and excitement, followed by a closing message by Masako Mori, special adviser to the prime minister in charge of women's empowerment and promoting understanding of LGBT, who introduced the government's new project to support female entrepreneurs.

The online part of the conference ended in a great success, with the wave of enthusiasm in the networking and Q&A sessions felt even to those present only remotely. It generated a sense of connection and fellowship among the participants, who thought about the theme "I Challenge" throughout the day and came up with diverse answers on personal goals they were setting for themselves to be part of the drive to achieve better results through diversity.

The second part of the conference, consisting of five talk shows and a networking party, will be held at the Grand Nikko Tokyo Daiba on Aug. 27.

Aiming to highlight issues related to a sustainable society, The Japan Times gave its support to this event by becoming a media sponsor.

Omron is helping firms to achieve carbon neutrality

Mission: Sustainability

OSAMU INOUE
RENEWS

Omron Corp. is generally known in Japan as a maker of medical devices, including blood pressure monitors and electronic thermometers. However, its main business is in factory automation, developing industrial robots and automated control systems.

During the past era of rapid economic growth in Japan, many social issues emerged, including urban population concentration and transportation congestion. Omron developed traffic signal systems and ticket vending machines, among others, laying the groundwork for Japan's transportation systems to develop. The company later led Japan's efforts to transition to an information society by delivering the world's first online automated cash dispenser to the central branch of Mitsubishi Bank in 1971 and developing the world's fastest fuzzy logic-based computer controller in 1987. Today, Omron is working to contribute to efforts to achieve sustainability through its core business.

Double A's from CDP

In 2022 CDP, an international nonprofit formerly known as the Carbon Disclosure Project, gave Omron an A, the highest score, in the two areas of climate change and water security. The number of participating Japanese companies exceeded 1,700, but only Omron and 17 other companies were given A scores in both climate change and water security.

The company has also been rated highly in key indexes related to ESG issues. In 2022, Omron was listed for the sixth straight year on the globally recognized Dow Jones Sustainability World Index, scoring in the top 3% in its industry, and was given an even higher rating by France's EcoVadis, awarded with a platinum rating, its sustainability-minded activities go beyond efforts for its own corporate social responsibility and carbon neutrality.

Long-term pledges

In its long-term vision released in 2022, "Shaping the Future 2030," Omron set five "material sustainability issues" for the first time. "The corporate philosophy that calls for our core business to contribute to achieving sustainability prompted Omron to take action," said Tsutomu Igaki, Omron's managing executive officer in charge of sustainability, brand, stakeholder engagement and communications.

Its mainstay factory automation equipment business, which promotes the realization of carbon neutrality, is no doubt the area with the greatest impact and deserves attention.



A factory worker collaborates with an Omron TM Cobot during assembly operations. OMRON CORPORATION

Helping improve productivity

Omron targets cutting greenhouse gas emissions in its operations by 100% by 2050.

In addition, it is also putting effort into helping customers and society achieve carbon neutrality through its products and services. In 2016, the company began providing a solution package that achieves automation at a higher level — dubbed innovative-Automation! — by combining items that were previously sold separately, including equipment, components and software.

Furthermore, in 2017, Omron launched the i-BELT service, which helps introduce reforms to the production floor by combining real-time data from sensors and equipment together with the customer's know-how. In 2022, the company also introduced reinforcement measures to speed up the use of data using artificial intelligence.

"By combining IoT, AI analysis and data utilization to make every part of a factory 'visible,' you can improve quality and increase energy productivity while improving the efficiency of energy consumption required for production," Igaki said.

i-BELT repeats the cycle of monitoring and improving throughout the year. Even if there is a change in a production line, Omron takes pre-emptive measures to prevent malfunctions or defective products and optimizes equipment, helping save energy and improve efficiency.

Now, how strong an impact can be expected? "Omron has a mainstay plant that manufactures factory automation equipment at the Ayabe factory in Kyoto Prefecture," Igaki said. "In this factory, energy consumption decreased 15% and energy productivity increased 16 times in 10 years even though the output increased by 35%. That outcome convinced us that Omron can help manufacturers double their energy productivity."

In fact, Omron last year joined the EP100 international initiative for improving energy productivity, under which it pledged to double energy productivity by



Omron's blood pressure monitor with Bluetooth short-range wireless transmission capability allows the user to manage vital data via the Omron Connect smartphone app. OMRON CORPORATION

2040, relative to a 2016 baseline. Omron is among the four Japanese companies that have joined the initiative, and the only Japanese manufacturer to do so.

Plastic waste

Perfect Sealing, an innovative-Automation! application that the company introduced in 2018, is a revolutionary technology that contributes to reducing plastic waste. Omron successfully developed a set of technologies that enables sealing biodegradable packages as fast as well as conventional films by using sensors and software to increase the precision of temperature control. This is now used by 350 companies, helping them introduce biodegradable films.

Combining this and i-BELT, Omron can contribute to a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from customer companies, in addition to reducing their plastic waste.

Furthermore, in 2022, Omron invested ¥11.8 billion (\$800 million) in JMD C, a medical data analysis company that has data on health checks on over 10 million people and on doctors' health insurance claims, and provides services using this data.

Devices that are compatible with Omron Connect, a smartphone app that enables the monitoring of vital data, including pulse and blood pressure, have been increasing. The aim of the two companies is to realize a revolutionary platform that can contribute to extending the human life span. "What we want to do is to find ways to prevent wide-ranging cardiovascular disorders, including strokes and heart attacks," Igaki said. "Going forward, we hope to create new value by working with wide-ranging partners." Omron's work to contribute to achieving sustainability through its core business will no doubt serve as an example for other major companies across the world.

Scan the QR code to read the full article about Omron's leading commitments and initiatives that contribute to the environment.



Sports and culture journalist Yasuko Miyajima (left), who has been producing sports programs for over 40 years, speaks with Tomomi Okazaki, a former member of Japan's national speedskating team and Olympic medalist. ICWB



Speakers at the "Women and Profitability" panel, from left: Asako Aoyama, a senior vice president at NEC Corp.; Wakana Tanaka, LinkedIn Japan country manager; Mitsuru Claire Chino, a managing executive officer at Itochu Corp.; and Kathy Matsui, a general partner at MPOWER Partners Fund L.P. ICWB



Kaori Sasaki is joined by Keiko Honda, an adjunct professor at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs. ICWB