

# sustainable japan

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Spaniard joined person-to-person marketplace when it was a startup

## Carlos Donderis bridges work cultures at Mercari

**Name: Carlos Donderis**  
**Title: Vice President of Engineering**  
**URL: www.mercari.com**  
**Hometown: San Lorenzo de Escorial, Spain**  
**Years in Japan: 13**

### Leaders & Readers

**KERRY FURUKAWA**  
 CONTRIBUTING WRITER

After a 10-day visit 13 years ago, Spaniard Carlos Donderis decided he wanted to live in Japan. He had been working as a programmer, and determined that in order to distinguish himself and get a job in Japan, he needed a strong specialization. He chose testing, which he didn't like, because nobody likes it, but there was a lot of demand for those skills. After a few months of job-hunting from Spain, which involved plugging translated terms into search engines, he got an offer. Much different from the systematic tech hiring that takes place today, Donderis — now vice president of product engineer-

ing at the online person-to-person marketplace Mercari — calls the recruitment for his first role in Japan chaotic.

Added to that, within eight months of Donderis' first day, the only two people who spoke English at the company resigned. He had initially planned to stay in Japan for a year, but that event started a rugged, unmapped path to learning Japanese and the country's culture and business practices.

Along the way to joining Mercari — then a startup that had been building a reputation for hiring a lot of overseas tech talent — Donderis developed an interest in how his back-office coding fit into strategic goals. At the same time, his sympathy for newly arrived foreign engineers grew. Not only did he want to make the environment more comfortable for them, he wanted to build understanding on both sides.

"Before Mercari, I got access to good mentors, bad mentors. I worked with good managers, bad managers. And I saw the huge influence, positive or negative, that having the right manager or the right mentor might have on an engineer or a team. And I was interested in becoming one of

these good managers. I became more and more interested in exploring working with people, not only with computers, and with teams, trying different setups so that the teams perform better. And on top of that, the reason why I decided to join Mercari is at that time, Mercari was going bold and hiring from abroad, and they got maybe 80 engineers or so from different countries, and almost none of them could speak any Japanese. The managers that were here couldn't really speak English. And I saw myself reflected in these engineers because I had been in their shoes for a long time. So I wanted to try to be on the opposite side this time, knowing what I know. I also saw that it was beneficial for the company because I was also one of these foreigners that can be very cocky. Japanese people don't antagonize as much, or they have a subtle way of antagonizing, but we foreigners are very loud, so I thought that because I was there as well, and through the years I also learned how to convey my message in a different way, I saw that I could be a good bridge between these two working cultures."

Now himself involved in recruiting from abroad, Donderis says the shrinking talent pool in Japan cannot supply the number of businesses. For this reason, organizations have to recruit from overseas and also have to start looking at entire teams located outside of the country.

At Mercari, the ratio of Japanese to non-Japanese engineers is 50:50, which Donderis says has produced "messy" challenges. Solutions have included not just providing language classes, but initiatives such as paid-for English or Japanese lunch sessions. Across diverse teams, however, he says people who



HARUO MOTOHASHI

### Game developer, engineer, writer

Carlos Donderis was born on March 3, 1979, in San Lorenzo de Escorial, about 50 kilometers from Madrid. After high school in his hometown, he studied computer science at the Complutense University of Madrid, as he wanted to learn how to build video games. Before coming to Japan in 2011, Donderis did stints as a software engineer, programmer and entrepreneur in Panama and Spain.

Before joining Mercari in 2019, he was the lead software engineer at the GMO Internet Group and development manager at Sansan, both in Tokyo. He started at Mercari as engineering manager before moving through the ranks to his current position as vice president of product engineering. His hobbies include writing science fiction, playing video games and cooking.

bit about the country, and we had an encyclopedia at home. So I looked for karate, I looked for Japan, I looked for Okinawa," the birthplace of karate.

As a teenager, Donderis was also interested in Japanese video games and anime. When he finally got a chance to visit the country as an adult, he was awestruck. Now married with a daughter, Donderis feels that he can make a contribution to Japanese society.

"I'm very grateful for all the things that Japan has done for me, and I think I've found my place somewhere in this society. I will never be Japanese myself, but I think I've found a spot for me and my family to contribute to the country. My wife is Japanese, so my baby is, I guess, it's a quarter Jamaican and Panamanian, Spanish and Japanese — it's a mixture of many bloods and cultures, but she's growing happy here."



"Trying to be mindful about how we consume or dispose of items, I think, is important." HARUO MOTOHASHI

want to communicate ultimately do, regardless of language barriers.

That insight has come from Donderis' experience in other multicultural business environments. He had worked in the international hub of Panama early in his career. That professional experience, along with the fact that he had lived in the Central American country with his family as a child, might have had some impact on his agility in diverse teams.

Donderis' Spanish mother and Panamanian father moved their family to Panama shortly after his birth until he was 7 years old. He returned to Spain with memories of vibrantly colored tropical produce, salsa rhythms, the heat, and smells of his Jamaican

grandmother's cooking. Another thing he brought back to Spain was a "funny accent," which led to him being bullied at school. His mother decided to send him to karate classes.

"At the beginning of karate, you sort of kneel down and meditate for a little bit, that is how all the lessons start. But I didn't know what I was supposed to do. And Spain is a very Catholic country, so I thought we were praying, and I asked my sensei, 'Is this praying?' And he told me, 'No, this is Japanese meditation, so you have to try to make your mind blank and just focus on breathing.' And I was a curious kid, so I was asking my mother, what is this Japan thing? My mother explained a little

## Hagi

Cooking starts in the soil, not in the kitchen



**TAEKO TERAO**  
 CONTRIBUTING WRITER

When it came to selecting a Destination Restaurant of the Year for the 10 winners for 2023, the three judges were unanimous: The honor went to the innovative restaurant Hagi in Iwaki, Fukushima Prefecture.

Due to the earthquake and tsunami of March 11, 2011, sales of some food products were restricted immediately after the nuclear disaster. Trawling and other fishing operations were long suspended in the Fukushima area. Throughout these 12 hard years, the chef and owner of Hagi, Harutomo Hagi, has led the way in collaborating with local producers to show the world the excellence of Fukushima's food.

Before the disaster, Hagi operated a French restaurant that seated about 40 and offered a prix fixe dinner for ¥5,000 (\$35). However, his approach to cooking and work shifted dramatically after the disaster. In August 2011, the French restaurant reopened under the name Hagi. The chef wanted to pay producers a fair price for high-quality ingredients without bargaining, so he raised prices at his restaurant with the aim of improving producers' lives. He eliminated lunch service and switched to a single *omakase* menu for ¥19,360 (tax and



**Address**  
 Hagi  
 171-10, Uchigo Midaisakaimachi, Iwaki,  
 Fukushima  
<http://www.hagi-france.com>



service fee included). Until very recently, he was able to serve only one party per day.

"Aside from the restrictions related to the nuclear disaster, some food producers evacuated," he explained. "I experienced the loss of things that had been there until the day before. If I still wanted to cook with local

food, the best I could do was gather enough for one party per day."

Although today the restaurant has returned to normal operations, it still seats only eight guests at a time. It survives at a fifth of its former capacity thanks to the many foodies who travel from Fukushima and well beyond to dine there.

**MASAO UCHIBORI**  
 GOVERNOR OF FUKUSHIMA PREFECTURE



We would like to congratulate Hagi on winning the Restaurant of the Year award. Through Hagi's diligent studies and careful selection of ingredients, they were able to contribute to the recovery from the Great East Japan Earthquake.

The city of Iwaki is well known for the seafood harvested from the Pacific off the coast of the Joban area and for its vegetables grown with great care. We hope that everyone will enjoy the exquisite cuisine that chef Harutomo Hagi has refined from ingredients that are filled with the producers' passion.

**HIROYUKI UCHIDA**  
 MAYOR OF IWAKI CITY



We would like to congratulate Hagi owner-chef Harutomo Hagi for winning this award.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to Mr. Hagi for his commitment to using Iwaki-sourced ingredients and his contribution to the recovery from the Great East Japan Earthquake through his food, in cooperation with local producers.

We hope that this award will bring global attention to his outstanding skills and the passion he puts into his cuisine, and will encourage many people to visit Iwaki.

## Nomura institute proposes 'GDP+i' to measure consumer satisfaction

### ESG/SDGs

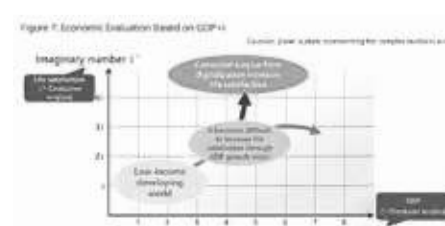
**HIROKO NAKATA**  
 CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Conventional economic indicators show the Japanese economy has been sluggish for decades, but a different approach suggests that people feel more content with their lives amid global digitalization, which could be channeled into economic power in the future, according to the Nomura Research Institute.

"Though it is not indicated by GDP (gross domestic product), Japanese people benefit from digital services and feel convenience and satisfaction with their lives. That's why we decided to propose GDP+i as an additional index," said Takeshi Mori, general manager for the Digital Society Research Office at NRI.

While GDP is a widely watched economic indicator based on the value of goods and services produced in a country, GDP+i is a new approach to gauging a country's economy. It combines GDP and estimates of people's satisfaction with their digital lives. To measure that, NRI uses the idea of the "consumer surplus," the difference between the maximum amount that consumers are willing to pay for a product and the actual price. The institute says it believes that digital technology is greatly expanding the consumer surplus.

Mori said the concept of GDP+i can be illustrated with a graph in which the horizontal axis shows GDP and the vertical axis shows subjective indicators, including the consumer surplus. To a certain extent, growth in GDP is correlated with people's life satisfaction. Beyond that level, however, people's contentment does not increase very much, and "this is where digital tech-



A chart showing the economic evaluation based on GDP+i NRI

nology can contribute to improvement on the vertical axis," says an NRI report in April on the new indicator.

NRI developed the idea of GDP+i during the pandemic when researchers realized that GDP does not fully reflect economic and societal reality.

For the past decade, Japan's GDP has been sluggish at around ¥520 trillion to ¥550 trillion (\$3.52 trillion to \$3.73 trillion) since the bursting of the economic boom of the late 1980s and early 1990s led to a deflationary economy. GDP even declined 4.5% year on year to ¥528 trillion in 2020, when the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted global supply chains and hit distribution and production lines.

Despite that, GDP+i shows a 15.2% consumer surplus growth at ¥263 trillion in 2020. Moreover, the researchers found that the indicator showed a steady increase during the country's economic doldrums in the last decades, Mori said. It rose in 2020 because Japanese people felt more contentment with their daily lives as the pandemic forced many companies to introduce digital workplaces, freeing workers from long and painful commutes, he said.

Another survey endorses the impact of digitalization in Japan. According to a survey conducted by NRI in August 2022, 65% of the Japanese respondents — the largest percentage among the eight countries surveyed — agreed with the statement that "the internet brings about convenience and comfort to our life," Mori said, and the Japanese respondents felt the lowest average satisfaction and flexibility in their lives so far. A total of 9,400 people ages 15 to 69 in Japan and 1,000 each in the U.S., Britain, Germany, Italy, Poland, Sweden and Switzerland responded to the survey.

Even before the pandemic, other surveys showed that people felt benefits from digitalization when the first smartphones were launched more than a decade ago, Mori said. People's sense of comfort notched up in surveys that NRI conducts every three years, with the percentage of Japanese who were satisfied with their life reaching 73% in 2012, up from 68% in 2009. Since then, the ratio has kept on inching up, reaching 78% in the latest survey in 2021.

Mori said the small jump in 2021 looked odd at first because economic indicators had not shown positive signs. For example, GDP



**Takeshi Mori, general manager for the Digital Society Research Office at NRI's Center for Strategic Management and Innovation NRI**

had remained little changed, and average wages had not risen either. Moreover, this was after the global financial crisis sparked by U.S. subprime loan problems. "We came to the conclusion that the biggest reason was the advent of smartphones," he said. Apple's iPhone, globally launched in 2007, came to the Japanese market in 2008. "The launch of smartphones was a symbolic event that blurred the GDP outcomes," Mori added.

Mori said smartphones changed people's lives drastically. And despite the magnitude of their impact, most of the services provided on smartphones — audio and video calls, social media, maps, weather forecasts and many others — are free.

Mori said the steady rise of the consumer surplus in Japan can potentially be turned into business opportunities by monetizing digital services with new ideas and proper pricing. Such content also supports higher productivity at work, he said.

Mori also said Japan needs to spend more resources for its digital infrastructure — including internet applications, automated driving systems and drone logistics systems — in a rapidly aging society. Conventional infrastructure such as roads and bridges deteriorates over time, but digital infrastructure increases in value by gathering more data and improving services. "Japan must shift its focus to digital society, which increases and accumulates its value over time," Mori said.

The Sustainable Japan Award commends individuals, companies and organizations who have made advances in sustainable efforts. To learn more, scan the QR code or visit <https://sustainable.jpantimes.com/sjaward2023>



Destination Restaurants 2023 AUTHENTIC JAPAN SELECTION

