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sustainable japan

Thomas Brodbeck helps network on science, innovation, environment No comfort zone for Swiss commerce chamber's head

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Years in Japan: 5

Leaders & Readers

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Growing up in the small Swiss town of Bonstetten, on the outskirts of Zurich, Thomas Brodbeck — now the president of the Swiss Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Japan and head of technical services at the Swiss construction chemical company Sika Japan — was always concerned about nature. "That's the great thing about growing up in a small country like Switzerland — you can live in a small town totally surrounded by nature but still be just 15 minutes' drive to Zurich city center," he said. Concerned about products being misleadingly advertised as environmentally friendly and the prospect of greenwashing, Brodbeck completed a degree in business administration and economics with a thesis examining whether consumers are really willing to pay more for products with lower emissions of carbon dioxide. "Twenty years ago, all the products were marketed as 'green,'" he said, "but from my perspective, most of them were not any different from what they were two years earlier. The term was overused, and people didn't really care that it was. So today, of course, it's totally different, but I wanted to investigate why."

automotive aftermarket, dealing with windshield replacements. "As the windshield is a safety-relevant part, it's connected to the functionality of the airbags to keep you safe inside the car, so there was a lot of training needed," he said. "But I'd been at it for 10 years, and I wanted to grow and challenge myself, and so I needed to step out of my comfort zone." His opportunity arrived in 2019 when Sika offered him a role as a business development manager in Japan. Arriving just before the pandemic and knowing little about the country, he had just enough time to set up a network of contacts and friends and get settled before the office was shut down for two years. "Japan was never on my radar," he said. "I think that was a good element, as I didn't arrive with any opinions — I just thought it was a safe place to live and probably a good place to work — so there was less chance of being disappointed." Despite the challenge of working online, Brodbeck got off to a flying start, quickly getting promoted to head of technical service, where, working with a team, he oversaw the integration of five companies into one and watched as Sika Japan grew from 180 employees to over a thousand in the space of five years. "You can imagine there's a lot of change management, bringing five companies together, so this was probably a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to support this kind of project." Wanting a new challenge and a chance to build his business and friend networks, Brodbeck joined the board of the Swiss Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Japan, found it was a great place to get valuable advice from Swiss working in Japan, and rose to become

its president. "For me, being the president of the chamber gave me so much exposure to different industries, which was once again getting out of my comfort zone, leaving my bubble and learning something new." With the Swiss Chamber of Commerce mainly acting as a networking platform, Brodbeck sees it partly as giving local companies an opportunity to learn more about environmental and sustainability best practices from Europe, and Switzerland in particular, an issue that he has commonly faced in his role at Sika, as Japanese firms often need to comply with foreign environmental regulations when dealing with overseas markets. "We hold regular luncheons at the chamber where we try to bring in Japanese and Swiss speakers for certain topics," he said. "We talk about science, innovation, environment, and we try to have an educational approach about these industries to share information on best practices, which hopefully make their way into some of the companies." Brodbeck considers the chamber's monthly luncheons to be its most interesting events, citing a recent example where they invited a Keio University professor to give a presentation on mental health, and they paired it with a presentation from the Adecco recruiting firm on their nonprofit open-source international mental health approach. They also recently held an event with a Tokyo University professor and a Swiss Ph.D. student introducing their work on developing artificial brain cells and how they communicate. "It was a good insight on the collaboration, the innovation and the type of research where Japan and Switzerland can work together — and we offer a platform where we can share this informa-



COSUFI

From Bonstetten to Tokyo

Thomas Brodbeck was born in Bonstetten, Switzerland, and completed an apprenticeship as a chemistry lab engineer at Sika Technology in the Altstetten quarter of Zurich before studying for a bachelor of science in business degree with a major in marketing at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland. Brodbeck spent over a decade specializing in the automotive aftermarket at Sika, overseeing safety in windshield replacement applications. He then took an offer to move to Sika Japan in 2019, taking up the position of business development in Japan and aftermarket coach for the Southeast Asian market, but then quickly moving into the new position of integration manager, overseeing the integration of five separate companies into Sika Japan. Today he is head of technical services, and has held the position since 2022. Also in 2022, he joined the Executive Committee of the Swiss Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Japan, and was elected to the presidency of the organization one year later. Brodbeck also sits on the board of the European Business Council and is involved in the Japan Swiss Society.

tion to our members." Brodbeck believes stepping out of his comfort zone and finding balance are the key to what keeps him inspired and motivated in life. "The key is to leave your comfort zone, try your best, bring in your expertise, but also respect the local culture to find the balance to do what makes you at the end happy and successful," he said. "I was very scared to leave the small country town I came from, but looking back, I have no regrets at all. The first step is always the most difficult one." Brodbeck and his colleagues at the Swiss Chamber of Commerce will be kept busy over the next few months, with what

Brodbeck assures us will be a 'full pipeline of events.' With the Switzerland Japan Economic Forum soon to be held in partnership with the Swiss Embassy, Brodbeck is anticipating that this year's premier networking event will be centered on the topic of biodiversity, and they are expecting a high level of participation from C-level executives from across the spectrum. They will also be holding their "Swiss Young Professionals event," billed as an opportunity to connect young Swiss change makers with established business professionals in an effort to bring them out of the student environment and give them a chance to build up their career and

business networks. For now, Brodbeck expects to be fully committed to the current project he is working on at Sika. "There's still a long way to go, and so that's my only horizon for now," he said. However, as a former manager at a Swiss ski shop in the Alps for two seasons during college, he hopes to get some time out over winter to visit some Japanese ski resorts "for some of that great-quality snow." He still remembers an important management lesson he learned from that ski shop experience: "You need a good story to tell, and you need to be honest."



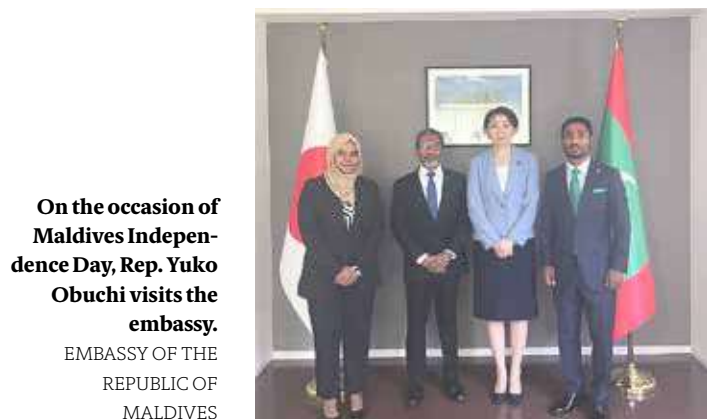
Times Gallery



The Embassy of Mexico hosts a farewell for Austrian Ambassador Elisabeth Bertagnolli, celebrating her successful tenure and wishing her the best in her future endeavors. EMBASSY OF MEXICO



Commemorating the 199th anniversary of Bolivia's independence. EMBASSY OF BOLIVIA



On the occasion of Maldives Independence Day, Rep. Yuko Obuchi visits the embassy. EMBASSY OF THE REPUBLIC OF MALDIVES



The charge d'affaires of Cuba, Dairon Ojeda, participates in the closing ceremony of the Hamanako-Cuba Hemingway Cup, presenting a special bottle of the Cuban rum White Marlin to the winning team. EMBASSY OF CUBA



Haitian Ambassador Watson Denis (rear center) poses with visiting Japanese students accompanied by professors at the embassy on Aug. 1. EMBASSY OF THE REPUBLIC OF HAITI



Almost 80 participants enjoy the American Chamber of Commerce in Japan Chubu Chapter's summer networking event "Bottoms Up" on Aug. 2 in Nagoya. ANDY BOONE



The Indonesian team parades through the center of the Miyagi city of Kesenuma wearing a variety of traditional costumes during the Aug. 3-4 Minato Matsuri. EMBASSY OF INDONESIA



The Liszt Institute Hungarian Cultural Center has opened the "Rubik 80x50" exhibition to honor the inventor Erno Rubik's 80th birthday and the cube's 50th anniversary. EMBASSY OF HUNGARY

Nissay Asset's CEO discusses sustainability trendsetters

Sustainable Japan Award: ESG Excellence Award

HIROKO NAKATA
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Can investors contribute to addressing global issues and still seek a financial return at the same time? The answer is yes, if you catch major social trends, said Hiroshi Ozeki, the president and chief executive officer for Nissay Asset Management Corp. "If an issue is important in global megatrends, there is a social demand for solving the problem and therefore a need to make it business," Ozeki said. It is not enough to invest in companies that are doing something good for society. More critical is to find social issue-oriented businesses that can generate profits, and then support them through investment. "That is an important point in being able to maintain sustainable investment," he said. Last year, Nissay Asset Management won the Sustainable Japan ESG Excellence Award, hosted by The Japan Times. Megatrends are major movements that are expected to influence the world for a long time — climate change, technological evolution like generative AI, aging societies, human rights and global divisions between superpowers. "When you invest for the long term, if you pick something that is part of a megatrend, that will be eventually lifted by a rising tide," he continued. "On the other hand, if the business runs against a megatrend, even a very attractive company could see its business disrupted by technological development or burdened with huge costs in responding to an issue."

Along with taking a bird's-eye view, inves-

tors also need an eagle eye for the development of specific products and services related to rising trends. "As for impact funds aiming to mitigate global warming, technologies keep evolving over time, and the growing businesses that you should invest in are changing. That's why you must be very careful" about trends, Ozeki said. Take energy usage as an example of how to hunt for promising business. Although how much carbon reduction companies achieve or how much renewable energy they introduce always draws attention, it is more valuable to look at their supply chain, think about which aspect of its energy — generation, transmission, storage or utilization — will have the strongest impact on a greener society, and then search for companies developing effective technologies for each. "In that way, it is possible to find a company that can contribute well to responding to climate change," Ozeki said. Another important factor for achieving both a social impact and a financial return is to check if the company's technology is stable and scalable — ideas and trials alone don't bring a return on investment. Similarly, even if a technology is outstanding, if it applies only to an extremely small market or for example lacks overseas customers, it likely won't bring much of a return. Therefore, to judge a technology, product or service, it is important to be responsive to the timing whether the technology gains a spotlight, gets into practical use or develops with scalability. So we want to make our antennae go up all the time," Ozeki said. For example, hydrogen power used to be minor due to scarce infrastructure. But now it has become an important part of managing variability in the supply of renewables such as wind and solar power. Also, new tech-



Hiroshi Ozeki, president and chief executive officer for Nissay Asset. COSUFI

nologies including direct air capture (DAC), which removes carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, may have a positive outlook as they evolve, he said. To be responsive to the latest trends in technology, Nissay Asset has a team that creates analyses and networks with global groups such as PRI (Principles for Responsible Investment), a UN-supported network of investors that works to incorporate ESG into sustainable investment, and AIGCC (the Asia Investor Group on Climate Change), an initiative to encourage action among Asian asset owners and asset managers. To evaluate business values, Ozeki wants companies to disclose their related information, and says there is no need to disclose information that is irrelevant to those values. "I want corporate leaders to think about whether their responses to climate change, human capital and nature capital are related to their materiality in their corporate values," he said, adding that they must also consider whether the issues provide them with corporate risks or opportunities. At the end of the interview, Ozeki said the global trend of ESG is not going backward even though there is opposition against it in parts of the United States. "Since it is necessary, and also since some people feel its advantages because it creates new jobs, sustainability investment will continue," he said.

The Sustainable Japan Award commends individuals, companies and organizations who have made advances in sustainability efforts. To learn more, scan the QR code or visit <https://sustainable.japantimes.com/sjaward2024>



"Sustainability investment will continue," Ozeki said, despite opposition in some quarters in the U.S. COSUFI