

## Fascinated by Japan

When Dirk Van Eester graduated in 1981 as master of engineering in computer science, the world lay open for him. After an extra year of computer science in the USA, he finally settled in Japan. He has lived in Tokyo already for 18 years, first as employee of Agfa-Gevaert. Later he even started his own company.

Q: Dirk, how did your expat story start?

In 1982 I was studying computer science at the graduate school of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. In June 1983 I received my MS in Computer Science. My years in the USA had been financed by a scholarship of the Rotary Foundation and in that framework I got known to a Japanese girl who had received the same scholarship.

We decided to marry and – because of nationality legislation – we chose to live in Belgium rather than Japan. I could start at Bell Telephone and in 1986 I switched to Agfa-Gevaert. Already during my pre-employment interview, it was noted that I was married to a Japanese and it was considered something that might be useful later on. I worked for 3 years in the “New Systems”-group of the Graphic Arts Division of Agfa in Mortsels.

By that time, my wife mastered Dutch quite well. She made good on our mutual promise to learn each other’s language. My Japanese was another problem: After following night school for 4 years, I had some insight in the Japanese language, but I could hardly have a simple conversation (and even that is probably an exaggeration). The only solution seemed to be to go and work in Japan for a while. Professionally this fitted well. As the headquarter representative of Agfa Graphics had just moved back to Belgium, it was decided that I should take his place. On July 14, 1989 I arrived in Tokyo-Narita with my wife, a boy of 2, a baby boy of 10 months ... and no luggage as KLM had left all of it in Schiphol. The movers brought our furniture a month later than promised and they messed up the customs paperwork.

Q: Can you explain a bit more what your job in Japan actually was?

From Agfa Headquarters I had gotten a relatively clear job description: communication with headquarters and assistance with the introduction of new products. However, once in Japan it turned out that one of the Japanese colleagues was already doing part of that work and he didn’t seem to be very willing to give up his preferential relationship with headquarters. So, I had to earn myself a position within Agfa Japan. In my experience it is not unusual for expats to arrive in Japan with a nice document from headquarters that explains all their rights and duties and then to find out that the local situation is quite different from all of this.

Q: Did you know enough Japanese to do your job well?

During my first month I had Japanese language classes in the morning and I went to the office in the afternoon. Together with the fact that everyone around me spoke Japanese, this made that I could activate my Japanese and I gradually started understanding what was going on around me.

Also in the office that proved to be useful because, except for 3 persons, nobody in Agfa Japan could speak English. All internal meetings were completely in Japanese. In the first weeks I only understood about 10%, but gradually that improved.

Q: So, how did you earn your place in Agfa Japan?

Luckily it was a time when still few people in Agfa Japan knew about the new digital techniques. I used that as a field where my contribution could be appreciated. Rather than to fight for the position that had been promised to me, I decided to create a new position myself. This went quite fine and ultimately, the tasks that had originally been intended for me, naturally came to me as well.

It became my task to understand new products and to propose ways to integrate them into the Japanese marketing policies. This required both a good understanding of the products and the understanding of the market needs. Gradually I also became the financial watchdog of the division: there is no use of bringing products to market if you can't earn a profit on them.

If you want to integrate yourself in an organization, you need to contribute something. As a foreigner, integration is made more difficult because of the language gap. It is needed you bring "something". For a person coming from a foreign headquarters to a Japanese subsidiary, the relations with headquarters are his/her most important asset: you know whom to call in order to get things done. If you move from a Belgian subsidiary to a Japanese headquarters, you are supposed to bring your European market-knowledge and you are supposed to be able to predict how European customers will react to new products.

Q: After a while you became the official interpreter for meetings between headquarter-delegations and Japanese customers. How did that happen?

We once had a meeting with a large Japanese company and people of our headquarters. After a somewhat awkward reaction of me, my Japanese colleague who had been interpreting suddenly told me "why don't you interpret yourself?" and he quit interpreting. So, I took over from him. In the beginning rather in panic because after only 6 months, my Japanese was far from good, but since that day I was the official interpreter for meetings between headquarter delegations and Japanese companies. Without realizing, my colleague had done me an enormous favor: I became absolutely necessary for the relations between headquarters and the Japanese market.

Q: Is the Japanese way of doing business different from ours?

The most important thing to remember is that in Japan the relationship with the customer, competitor or supplier is the crucial factor. The Japanese way of doing business is much closer to the Belgian way than to the American way. When I go with a Belgian salesman to a Belgian customer the atmosphere is similar as when I do that in Japan. Quite a bit of time is used to talk about personal things and business is conducted as something that results from the good personal relationship.

An important difference, however, is that it is almost impossible in Japan to get an appointment with a big company if you are not being introduced by someone. You can not call the general phone number of a company and expect to be connected to the person in charge of a certain product. In the best case, you know someone in that company who is in charge of another product. You ask him/her to introduce you to the right person. In most cases you need one more step because you often do not know anyone at all in the targeted company.

Because of my long presence in Japan and by working with many companies, I have managed to build up a network that can help in facilitating this introduction phase. My experience also allows me to judge which social customs I can skip “being a foreigner” and in which case I best act as “half Japanese”. For example, I only write emails in English, but I make phone calls mainly in Japanese. This allows me to be very factual in my written communications and to orally inform Japanese partners that I will have proper regard for the Japanese traditions and that I will explain the Japanese needs to my western clients.

Q: I can imagine that doing business in Japan is not simple ...

If I should quote one point that is often the cause for failed relations between European and Japanese companies, it would be “commitment”.

One of the reasons for this is that western people (and especially Flemish) understand the English word “promise” in a completely different way from the way the Japanese do. If a Flemish company “promises” something, it means they “try to realize” what they promised. If a Japanese company “promises” something, they will realize it, even if it almost means the bankruptcy of the company. Very often this difference is not well understood by the people doing the communication. That leads to misunderstandings and to mutual accusations of bad will.

All of this can be very simply avoided if a mediator detects these discrepancies and resolves them before they become a problem. In such circumstances I play an important role because both Japanese and westerners recognize that I understand the other culture. I can quietly warn the Japanese side that there is a potential misunderstanding and I can coach the western side to be more specific in what exactly they are “promising”, suggesting them to also mention the limitations of their offer.

Q: How come you started your own business and what is it exactly you are doing?

After 15 years with Agfa, we reached a point where the film products had no future anymore. Some companies saw it come and diversified. Others – like Agfa – tried to be the “sole survivor”. This implied that my strengths became less and less relevant for the local needs of Agfa Japan. Therefore I started looking at other opportunities in 2004. Because of the school situation of my children, I decided to stay in Japan and as it is not easy to switch to a different company while being abroad, I decided to offer my know-how as a consultant. I started my own company: D-VECS ([www.d-vecs.com](http://www.d-vecs.com)).

With D-VECS I do rather similar work to what I did with Agfa: I help western (most often Flemish) companies to do business in Japan. Depending on their needs I am their “salesman”, their “Japan Office”, their “local representative”, their “interpreter”, their “travel agent” etc. The most important is that I help them to use the difference in culture to their advantage rather than to let it work against them. As “Japan Office” I also make sure that Japanese partners feel secure in the support and communications. I can also help in addressing the Japanese trade press in Japanese and facilitating interviews with the western managers of my client companies. I am also available for helping Japanese clients locally

with any needs and questions they might have about the products that are being offered. Although my experience is usable in any industry, coincidence has pushed me rather towards the semiconductor industry and it is there that I have most contacts.

Q: You studied engineering at university. Is this relevant for the work you are doing?

Sure it is. I am working in a very technical environment with clients that talk about technological projects. Even if I am just a facilitator it is important that I technically understand what both parties are saying. This requires both technical background and sufficient language knowledge (mostly Japanese, Dutch and English).

Q: Does Japan also have Engineering degrees and do they have the same value as in Belgium?

In the Japanese system, “what” you studied is generally less important and “where” you studied is more important. The first question will always be “at which university” and only the second will be regarding your major. Of course, it is clear that people with a technical education tend to end up in more technical jobs, but the relation is less explicit than it is in Belgium.

Companies also care more about a logical evolution in the responsibilities of their employees. No Japanese company will put a recent graduate in charge of a group of people: you always start at the bottom. A good education and a good diploma of course allow you to move up more quickly.

Q: Is it true that there is a lot of job-related stress? Is it possible to have a good balance between work and family?

In Japan “form” is very important. This is obvious not only in the ritual of exchanging business cards and packing presents, but also in the attitude towards work. It is at least as important to “be busy” as to “realize something”. Therefore Japanese tend to work long hours, but they are not necessarily working intensely. In a normal office it is very difficult to leave before 7pm: that looks lazy. When you are doing business with a large Japanese company, it will be no problem to find middle management at their desks at 8pm or 9pm. This of course implies that younger children seldom see their father during the week. With some bad luck (f.i. sales-oriented job), also Saturday goes to the company. Sunday is reserved for recuperating missed sleep ... and it is obvious that education of the children is mainly a mother’s job in Japan. This also implies that a “good mother” can not possibly have a full-time job, because then she would end up in the same pattern as the father ...

Q: Finally, is it possible for a foreigner to have successful career in Japan?

The possibility that a foreigner builds a successful career in a company in Japan is rather small. The main reason for this is language: to function normally in an office, you need to be able to properly use written language. As that language is Japanese, this poses an insurmountable problem for most non-Japanese. Learning spoken Japanese to a reasonable level is not impossible, but mastering written Japanese is almost impossible if you did not go through the Japanese educational system.