

How to do business in Japan - Successfully

Ten years ago Anton Lang took part in an „Executive Training Programme for Japan” sponsored by the European Union. Today he is the Managing Director of the Japanese subsidiary of Klingelberg, a German Mechanical Engineering company.

Anton Lang shares his views and experiences on how he ended up in Japan and what European businesses need to do when doing business in Japan.

How did you end up Managing Director in Japan?

During my executive training I got to know and love Japan and the Japanese culture. Originally I had thought of going to England for a year to widen my horizons. As one of our main clients is Japanese, it was soon clear that gaining experience and a network in Japan would be a good investment.

How were the first months in Japan?

The first year of the course was by far the most exhausting year I have ever spent. The programme was very intensive and demanding. Language and culture training day in, day out – and that without family and friends in a strange culture. This was difficult to adjust to. But we were a group of 50 people from all over Europe and this network was a very important part. Many of the relationships I built then have lasted until today.

When did you start meeting Japanese people?

The contact to the Japanese took much longer. During regular events Japanese and Europeans would try out their language skills and slowly begin to know each other. But the real breakthrough was when I bought a motorbike and a youth-hostel guide and travelled through Japan. Here I saw the beauty of the country and met many interesting and very friendly people. That was when I fell in love with Japan - have been here ever since.

How did you meet Japanese business people and get to know the business practices?

Part of the course is to spend a few months within a local company. This was a great experience. So far we had only learnt the theory of Japanese business practices and now it was time to see them for real. Here I was completely submerged into the company and realised, for instance, how hierarchic the structures are compared to most European companies. Valuable experiences included learning how to give instructions and how projects are managed and delivered.

What has been the most valuable for your current work?

The relationships that I have built up have been very important. Our client was very impressed by the fact that our company was willing to invest in an 18 month training course. On a corporate level, Japanese business people valued the gesture and investment. And on a personal level I was met with respect and appreciation. In my current job I have been able to use the knowledge on Japanese business practices and relationships to quickly gain an overview of situations and decisions. This seems to impress my Japanese colleagues.

What would you share with a company thinking of investing in Japan?

Japan is the richest economy in Asia. If you can even get a bit of the cake, it will be a great financial return. But this requires patience. The return on investment needs quite a while – but it will pay off. The other requirement is to have an ‚expert’ actually in Japan – someone who understands the business practices and is willing to build up the relationships and the understanding.

For a European, this requires a really sound basis. The ETP training programme is 18 months long, the level of Japanese taught is very high and it is highly regarded by Japanese businesses and government. In addition, companies receive financial support from the EU and over 300 out of the 800 participants are still in Japan today. This shows how successful the integration is.

Through the programme you can really differentiate yourself from foreign competition because you are taught to understand correctly what your business partner is saying and how he thinks.

About the Executive Training Programme for Japan and Korea

The European Commission is offering EU-based companies an ideal chance to optimise their business opportunities in these countries by sponsoring an Executive Training Programme. During 18 months in Japan or 9 months in Korea, a representative from your company can profit from business exposure whilst gaining an appreciation of the culture and nuances of Japanese or Korean life and business.

To start the programme in Belgium, please contact Steven Verhasselt (+32 2 663 48 20 or steven.verhasselt@shlgroup.com) as soon as possible.