

An Interview with Miharu Koezuka, Senior Managing Director, General Manager, Business Operation Headquarters, Takashimaya Co., LTD.

2 A leading executive of Takashimaya, a Japanese retail business giant, talks about how her company has been successful in utilizing the full potential of women

Interview & Writing: Naoko Sakai & *Japan SPOTLIGHT* Editorial Section

Miharu Koezuka, a senior executive of Takashimaya and distinguished business leader in Japan, discussed in an interview with *Japan SPOTLIGHT* her experience in the retail business as both a working mother and a daughter caring for her elderly mother. Her story provides a valuable lesson for business managers, both female and male, as it is meaningless to make such a distinction between men and women in learning about management or life. Her story is especially relevant in the context of how we can take full advantage of female human resources, which is today an important policy issue in Japan. But whether you are man or woman, a fine business person can offer key lessons for your life.

Retail Business Traditionally Good Working Place for Women

JS: Among the reasons Takashimaya was selected among the 50 leading companies for women in APEC were your efforts to improve the business executives' awareness of the need to fully utilize women's competency, strengthen on-the-job training for assigning women to key posts, and consolidate support systems for working mothers and improve their working environment. How does your company now promote a working environment friendly for women?

Koezuka: Although we set a target to assign a certain percentage of key posts to women, as board members we do not make any clear distinction between men and women in terms of post assignment. Takashimaya had the first female senior executive among companies listed on the first section of the Tokyo Stock Exchange in 1981, with the appointment of Ms. Ichiko Ishihara. She joined Takashimaya in 1952, attracted by a promotion and salary system that did not discriminate by sex or academic record. Our company has a tradition of providing



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all employees with equal opportunities for promotion. This corporate culture of ours helped make it possible to be selected as one of those 50 leading companies.

Another reason may have been that 80% of our customers are women. Whether or not we have truly enjoyed equal opportunity between men and women in terms of promotion and salary increases, our job is not one where being a woman is a handicap. I am not saying that our retail business is far from being part of a male-dominant society, but working for a female-oriented market serves as a base for equal job opportunities between men and women in our company.

JS: Even long before the law on equal employment opportunities, Takashimaya had adopted nondiscriminatory recruitment and salary systems. Was this a special case among companies

in Japan?

Koezuka: Yes. When I joined Takashimaya in 1979, companies in Japan could say in public that they would not hire any woman. Even among the department stores, when I sought job interviews, only Takashimaya and Seibu Department Store responded positively.

History of Work-Life Balance System in Takashimaya

JS: There are times when women need to work and take care of their families simultaneously, especially after marriage or the birth of children. How has your company created systems to achieve a work-life balance that encourages working women to continue their careers, such as maternity leave or caregiving leave?

Koezuka: When I had my first child after joining a company, I was allowed to have six weeks' leave before and after the birth, and then after the birth I could come to the office 30 minutes after the start of office hours and leave 30 minutes before the end of the office hours. That was all the benefit that a working mother could take advantage of. There were very few daycare facilities where they could accept babies less than one year old. In such a working environment, without any family support or something similar, working woman would have to quit their jobs.

Ms. Ishihara has told us that we should employ helpers to take care of children, even if it means paying more than our salary. In her case, the situation was much more difficult than mine. She had a housekeeper, since she had to take care of her husband and other family members living with her.

I believe we have been able to accommodate a variety of systems in favor of working women thanks to Ms. Ishihara's experience. Our company's reemployment system was introduced in 1986, though

among department stores Seibu and Isetan had adopted this prior to us.

Since then, a system for work-life balance has been continuously improved. When it was first introduced there were only two working patterns, but now there are five working patterns among which an employee can choose. The working patterns include leaving the office at 3:45 p.m. to go to pick up their kids at a daycare facility, finishing work before 5:00 or 6:00 p.m., and working shorter hours over more days so that it makes no difference to the official annual working hours. The working patterns adopted by women have increased, as the number of working women is rising today along with their need for diversified patterns.

Previously we had no option but to quit our jobs, since there was no maternity leave system yet. But now our employees can take up to three years' maternity leave for one child.

When your child grows up and goes to elementary school, after the first grade there are no childcare facilities. To care for kids at elementary schools, we now have a longer period to be applied to such maternity leave. I think women who are determined to continue working can do so now for a long time.

Our male employees can take advantage of these systems as well, though they are reluctant to do so. We encourage men to use these systems.

In our company, not only permanent employees but also contract employees or part-time employees can utilize these systems. There are many such non-permanent employees who have been working at the same sales spots for a long time in our company, and their customers and the skills they have acquired are considered valuable resources for our competitiveness. Their permanent departure from our company due to a change in their lifestyle would be a significant loss to us, so we decided to apply the working system for permanent employees to them as well.

Careful & Sophisticated Management Necessary

JS: So your company has arranged working systems to achieve a work-life balance for your employees. But I imagine the supervisors at some working spots might have difficulty in planning shifts for their staff with such a variety of working hours. Are your working systems well received by everybody in the company?

Koezuka: When I was working more than 10 years ago at a sales spot, we had more than 10% of the employees there working on hours applied to working mothers, which was our peak then. In this situation, we could not maintain our sales business without very careful management for each employee with different working hours. Many staff would leave the store earlier than usual, and employees working on the ordinary schedule would often have to work longer than usual for this reason. The managers learned how to balance the interests of



those people with different working hours to enable everyone to work well without complaints. The management in our company has been learning how to create a happy working environment since such a variety of working systems have been introduced.

Our labor union also provided us with their needs and requests, and the management has been trying to find solutions in collaboration with the union.

I think no organization is free from trouble, and we also had many problems in our management. The working mothers, their colleagues and their superiors all have their own interests. How the management can balance these different interests at the working spots is the key to our business success. What they learned in their efforts to balance these interests in on-the-job training has been reflected in further elaboration of working hours for working women, as well as in the various maternity leave systems.

“Mentor” System — Important Communication Means

JS: Your “mentor” system is intended to let young employees working in their fourth year after joining the company consult with their seniors working in their 10th year about their problems or difficulties. This is one of the reasons why your company was selected among the 50 leading companies for women in APEC. Could you tell us the details of this?

Koezuka: It was introduced in 2009. Our longer business hours in our stores triggered this introduction. We have longer business hours than before and no regular day off as we used to have. In addition, we have different working hours. This makes it difficult for employees to communicate well with each other, since they would meet with each other only a few times a week, much less often than ever. We used to have an office trip or a sports event on our day off and went for drinks after work, but now we cannot see each other even at a welcome or farewell party for colleagues before about 9:00 p.m.

We lost the time to talk with our superiors about some problems or trouble we have in our job and find it difficult to talk about them spontaneously during working hours.

So we introduced this “mentor” system in order to restore our support for young employees suffering from such a shortage of time to consult with their superiors or colleagues. The mentors themselves could think about their own path in talking about their work experience with their younger colleagues, and this would be a good learning process in management for them as well.

The core mission of this system is to encourage these young people to recognize how much they contribute to the company, in the hope that such recognition will lead to a greater incentive to work. This system is highly appreciated by young employees as a way of discussing what cannot be said in their workplaces.

Matching mentors and younger employees is done regardless of workplaces or sex. It is a great honor to be chosen as a mentor. The



frequency of these meetings is once a month for half a year during working hours, and even after their working hours if they agree.

More Women Managers in Takashimaya

JS: For a long time your company has been employing men and women with equal salaries and job profiles. There must be very few people working with stereotypes about differences in sex.

Koezuka: It depends on the person. It is certainly true that our jobs in department stores are the least discriminatory by sex, but in sections such as finance or management planning there are more men than women. Today, we can certainly see an increase in the number of women working in the sections rather than in the stores. Buyers used to be mostly men, but the number of female buyers has increased today. Key posts were occupied by men in the past, but today half of the division chiefs and the head of the buyers are women. We think there should be more women in the finance and management planning sections, if they are qualified.

JS: You yourself once quit Takashimaya and came back to the job by using the reemployment system in 1987. Do you think you would have used the maternity leave system if it had existed when you had your child?

Koezuka: Yes. Taking care of your kids is such an important task for men and women. If you had the option of taking leave, that would

certainly be a good idea. In my case, many other factors, such as my mother then having been hospitalized and my having worked for a small company as a temporary transfer, made me quit. I would not have quit if there had been a maternity leave system then.

JS: When working women take temporary leave, is there not a concern that their promotion could be retarded due to this stall in their career?

Koezuka: I think it is inevitable. Our job is daily sales. Though we need creativity as well in our work, we would simply lose clients and sales that could have been obtained during that year or two years off. It is true that in this situation we would contribute less than our colleagues, whether we were creative or not.

However, in our company, we do not regard such a blank gap in a career as a negative factor in job assessment or promotion. When we are at an age to be promoted to a management post, the company's assessment of our performance in deciding on promotion would not consider such gaps.

Our company always sees how much you have contributed in your career and in particular, today, we all understand well that maternity leave is just temporary and not to be considered a demerit in your career.

JS: With such support systems in place, there must be many women aiming to become managers. Will this make it necessary for your company to have even more support for such women? Are there any female managers who use the special working hours for working mothers?

Koezuka: Yes, there are such female managers working on the working mothers' timetable. This year, the percentage of female managers to all managers has risen to 20.8%. In particular, the percentage of female managers at sales spots is very high. But as business hours are longer today in our department stores and working on shortened time is difficult, many more female managers are working on the working mothers' timetable in the sections rather than sales places. To keep our sales spots functioning well, we should let these women choose the section where they would like to be managers.

JS: The Abe administration strongly recommends that companies raise the percentage of female managers to 30% by 2020. Does your company have any such targets?

Koezuka: Last year, we had 20% as our target and we have achieved

it already this year. At this moment, the majority of working women are in their forties. They will be managers, heads of divisions or directors of departments. I assume the percentage of female managers will start increasing from now on. There are already some in key management posts in their forties but there will be many more in the near future.

How Many More Women Could Be Managers in Japanese Firms?

JS: Finally, in Japan, though we have a numerical target such as 30% of management posts being taken by women, there are still far fewer female managers than the target. What do you think will be necessary to achieve this target?

Koezuka: We have to do many things. First of all, women should be clearly aware of their role and responsibility in working for a company. Women should do their best to make contributions to their companies and society simply as individual human beings, and companies should likewise expand the working possibilities for all their employees regardless of sex. I would hope that they think about how to utilize women as human resources with individual characters.

More importantly, unless women work we will have a shortage of labor in Japan, and we should think about how to avoid such a crisis. We should create a system with a work-life balance and above all a new corporate culture in which all can be beneficiaries of this new system.

Even if we have such a system, we cannot use it very often in a conservative corporate culture. The top management of a company should encourage women to use the system. Unless they do so and publicly announce a target for increasing the number of female managers, it will be difficult to have more female managers in a company where working women are not their mainstream employees, unlike ours.

In reality, companies whose presidents have publicly announced numerical targets for female managers have actually achieved these targets in most cases. Unless a company's president clearly announces a target, it will be difficult to achieve it, whatever the government has announced.

How well the top management of a company understands this issue will be a key to achieving the target set by the government today in Japan.

JS

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