

Interview with Cynthia Usui, Country Manager at LOF Hotel Management, Japan

A Housewife's Journey from Motherhood to Management

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

Cynthia Usui, country manager at LOF Hotel Management, Japan, has had a distinctly unusual career. She decided to become a stay-at-home mom after giving birth to her daughter, and 17 years later rejoined the workforce with a cafeteria job at the international school her daughter attended. She returned to Japan in 2011, and started out as a telephone receptionist. She joined the hotel industry as a corporate sales manager at the ANA InterContinental Tokyo, and quickly rose through the ranks. She was also with Coca-Cola Japan's hospitality team for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games until last February.

She is firmly convinced that Japan's housewives have acquired skills and experiences that equip them to be more than part-time workers, and that Japanese firms should do more to help them rebuild their careers.

(Interviewed on July 26, 2021)

Skills Acquired at Home

JS: In your book *Eight Things Full-Time Housewives Should do Before Entering the Workforce* (published in 2017 in Japanese by Kadokawa Publishing), you mentioned that your competency developed during your experience as a housewife was useful in your restarted business career. What do you think are the skills a housewife should develop?

Usui: Unlike other jobs, housewives cannot simply walk away. They cannot exchange their families for another when the going gets rough. They need to be patient and creative in finding solutions to their problems. As the children grow older, their needs change, and mothers adapt to meet these needs, making them resilient to change.

JS: In business today, we believe such resilient human resources should be more welcome than ever, given the drastic changes in the business environment. Could you be more specific about how housewives could be such resilient resources?

Usui: I was a trailing spouse, a housewife who accompanied her husband on his overseas assignments. I spent 17 years raising our daughter in five different countries. There are many Japanese trailing spouses like myself. Unlike the men who generally arrive to join well-established offices, the women have to build their homes from



Cynthia Usui

scratch. The task of cooking a Japanese meal in a foreign country starts with figuring out what ingredients are available, and where to find them. In addition to the daily housekeeping, if they have children, they need to learn to navigate the school system, and interact with the local community without the assistance of local staff that their husbands rely on at their offices. These experiences equip these women with skills that corporate Japan needs to expand overseas.

JS: Why do housewives need to become extremely patient, in particular, as you said?

Usui: Babies were not born speaking. Mothers need to learn how their newborns communicate, and they need to continue learning how to communicate with their children whose needs will change as they grow older.

JS: Does raising a child lead not only to business skills but also to maturity as a human being?

Usui: As a parent, it was my responsibility to discern my daughter's strengths and weaknesses, and to help her realize her full potential as a person. Parenting has made me a keen observer of people, and this has enabled me to mentor younger colleagues.

JS: Would you say it is more important to recognize your child's uniqueness and think about how to

encourage their abilities than just to read a book on how to raise a child?

Usui: I am a voracious reader, and I read a lot about raising children. Every child is different, and I worked on getting to know my child, and finding the best way for her. I became a very good observer, and this had helped me in anticipating the needs of my clients when I began a career in sales. After all, sales is all about meeting and exceeding the expectations of each and every client.

Tapping Into a New Resource

JS: In the case of Japan, we are facing a serious shortage in the labor force as aging progresses. It is often pointed out that we should take advantage of a housewife's potential capacities. How do you think Japanese society needs to change to realize this?

Usui: Japan needs to stop thinking of housewives as a source of cheap labor, and start allocating resources to assist them in rebuilding their careers. There are currently re-education, and re-skilling programs for men who are retiring from their companies, but there are none for housewives who have "finished" raising their children. Why is that? Is it because the policy makers are all men?

JS: Japanese society is rather backward in utilizing the resources of working women. Is Japan far behind the rest of the world in this regard?

Usui: LOF Hotel Management is committed to assisting stay-at-home moms build careers in the hospitality industry, but it has not been easy. We pay an hourly wage of 1,200 yen, and 10 hours of training costs us 12,000 yen. We have trained a number of housewives who quit after a couple of days on the job. We have to absorb the loss, and that is tough for a small company like ours. I suggest that the government subsidize the salaries of these women while they are in training. That should incentivize companies to invest time and effort in hiring housewives.

JS: In Japan, diversity is now increasingly considered a key issue in many areas. Yet we still see gender stereotypes in working styles. Diversity is a concept that has not spread very widely or deeply yet in Japan, isn't it?

Usui: The definition of diversity in Japan is very often limited to gender and race, but diversity is much more than women and foreigners in a sea of Japanese men. Are the women of different ages? Do they have different life experiences, educational and professional backgrounds?

JS: We should be more aware of the need to care for individual character and develop a culture of respecting an individual.

Usui: I would like to think that LOF Hotel Shimbashi, our very first hotel in Japan, has a diverse team. We have women of different ages and backgrounds. There are Japanese housewives and male and female college students, Filipino high school graduates who used to work in a *bento* (packed lunch) factory, and single mothers. Japanese companies need diverse teams to survive the rapidly changing business environment.

Regaining Confidence to Rejoin the Workforce

JS: How can a housewife feel confident in herself after restarting in business? In general, a housewife's work is not easy to evaluate as it is considered not professional. This could lead to many housewives lacking confidence in themselves.

Usui: The fastest way to regain one's self-confidence is to accomplish a task that one dislikes. For example, as a stay-at-home mom, I did not like cleaning the toilet and the bathroom, but they were always on the top of my list of things to do! Once I got them done, all the other housekeeping chores seemed like walks in the park! I did my chores according to schedule, and I did them regardless of how I felt that day. That is what professionals do, right? After years of working as a professional, I did not have much difficulty adjusting to working in an office.

JS: In many cases, unfortunately, housewives quit jobs within one year after coming back to business. To avoid this, would you suggest they simply do what they can in their given job rather than try to select a job that they prefer?

Usui: I was able to rebuild my career because I joined an industry that was taking off, and jobs were being created. Rejoining the workforce is similar to starting a journey. The destination does not really matter in the beginning. Just get on the train. You can always change trains along the way, and decide on your destination during the ride. Your first job is definitely not going to be your last, but it could lead to your next job!

JS: In light of the high rate of job turnover among the young in Japan, would you recommend this approach to Japanese youth as well?

Usui: High turnover? Really? I believe that the average is lower in Japan than in other OECD countries. When it comes to new jobs, I subscribe to the three-month rule. I once worked as a cashier in a supermarket. I have to say that it was one of the most difficult jobs I have ever had because I had to remember and execute several payment processes before a line of customers! Practice and repetition did not make me perfect, but it certainly reduced my mistakes! In the same way that the world was not built in one day, you do not learn a job in a few days. I say give yourself three

months.

JS: Would it be a pleasure for them to find they could manage to do what they were unable to do at the beginning?

Usui: Not many people are able to combine what they like to do, and what they can be paid for to do. And to say that we must all find enjoyment in our work smacks of entitlement. We must all decide for ourselves what we expect from our jobs, and align our expectations with reality.

Remote Work During the Pandemic

JS: The pandemic has encouraged teleworking in Japan as well. With the further segmentation of jobs and division of labor, short-term labor called “gig work” without employment contracts will increase. Could this situation encourage a housewife to do housekeeping, raise children and work at a business simultaneously at home?

Usui: Japan has a labor shortage, and with a declining and graying population, this labor shortage will only worsen. The tourism industry is labor intensive, and as a hotel operator, I am consistently thinking of ways to reduce our labor cost, and exploring alternative manpower options. Instead of hiring an accountant, we have chosen to break down our accounting tasks, and outsourced some of them to a firm with a team of bilingual accountants in Malaysia. Our reservation system is cloud based, and that gives us the option of training stay-at-home moms, and having them work from home. Hospitality at the highest level will always require the human touch, but automation will make it easier for people to provide that hospitality.

JS: You have adjusted well to such a change in the business environment. Is that thanks to your experience as a housewife?

Usui: Yes, of course. I have since discovered that as a result of having raised a child in five different cities, I have developed skills that have given me a distinct advantage over my colleagues. I was part of the PTA and the local community wherever we went, and my experiences interacting with people of different nationalities enables me to understand the needs of the international travel market.

JS: To take advantage of a housewife’s full potential, we would need not only retraining programs for them in companies but also seminars to remind them of their potential or matching events to connect businesses and housewives looking for a job. Would NPOs promoting such events encouraging women to join the workforce again be important?

Usui: I have learned from experience that programs for women trying to rebuild their careers can only be successful with the support of the business community. With grants from the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry and the Japan Tourism Agency, I have conducted two hospitality courses that included an introduction to the hotel industry and careers within the industry; a refresher on writing resumes and job interviews; and most importantly, a job fair that matched the students with prospective employers. Program organizers must work with businesses to ensure that they are teaching skills sought after by businesses.

JS: It is true that a good working housewife could be much more competent than a male salaried worker in general. It is also true that another key issue to achieve growth of business would be to raise resilience of employees working for a long time in a big company.

Usui: Yes, I believe that in some cases, stay-at-home moms are more employable than salarymen who have been doing the same thing for decades. They are more flexible and able to adapt because the needs of their families have changed over the years. I am not completely against Japan’s lifetime employment system because it does provide Japanese society with a degree of stability. I see it as corporate Japan providing universal basic income on behalf of the government. I am convinced that it is the seniority system that is unfair to women, and all those who cannot work continuously in the same company. Employees should be evaluated, promoted and rewarded based on their performance and results, and not years of service.

Conclusion – Working Mothers

JS: There are now increasing numbers of working mothers. What do you think about them?

Usui: I believe women should be able to work when they want to. I do not believe in the traditional definition of work-life balance. Why should balance be measured daily, weekly or monthly? Why not in years?

Going to school in our teens and twenties, settling into a career and starting a family in our thirties, accelerating our careers in our forties, attaining leadership positions in our fifties, and retiring in our sixties – that is all in the past. Now that we are living longer, there is no need to live the life that was modeled when the average life span was 60 years. Why can’t a woman, or a man, choose to concentrate on raising children before ramping up a career?

There is no right way to live life, but there is the best way for each and every one of us. It is up to us to find that best way. **JS**

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