

Expatriates Like the Pace of Regional Japan

By Bradley Cox

The trend for businesses, both foreign and Japanese, to move out of Tokyo to regional areas of Japan brings not only offices, factories, development and a boost to local economies, but also brings people to the provinces. Japanese workers are regularly transferred, often moving to other parts of Japan. Nearly any salaried worker on the Yamanote-Line train can give you a list of two or three regional branch offices he has been transferred to since starting with his company. However, the high concentration of foreigners in Tokyo points to a preference by non-Japanese to reside in a more international setting.

The wide variety of facilities and entertainment suited to "international" tastes in Tokyo certainly makes it the "international capital city" of Japan. Foreign employees of companies planning projects outside Tokyo, however, may face challenges apart from those of this "foreign expatriate community." The challenges they face on moving out of Tokyo include the small number of foreigners in provincial cities, the unfamiliarity to local people of new foreign residents, the kind of jobs that are available to foreign employees and the way that position is affected by the company's new location.

In July of last year Nippon Motorola Ltd. (NML), a subsidiary of the giant Motorola Inc. of the United States, opened an assembly and test plant, located about 300kms north of Tokyo in Sendai City, Miyagi Prefecture. This move not only brought a new international company to the largest city in the Tohoku region, but also brought to an area of rural Japan some fresh foreign "Motorolans." Of the 300 employees at the new plant, three are from the U.S., one from Brazil and one from France, working as managers or engineers.

These foreign NML employees are a rarity in Sendai. The foreign population of Sendai is only around 5,200, three-quarters of whom are of Korean or Chinese descent. Of the remainder, most are ei-

ther involved in teaching English or studying at one of the universities. Working for a subsidiary of a large American electronics company sets these foreign workers apart and introduces a new kind of foreigner to Sendai.

Christine Charlet has been with Motorola for the last five years, spending time in Germany and the U.S. before taking on this new job as finance section manager in February 1991. For this report, NML chose Christine to represent the views of her co-workers because of her "international" background. It seems that NML would prefer its foreign workers to be seen as international staff rather than just transferees. Chikara Okabe, supervisor of personnel affairs, is quick to confirm that in Sendai, "NML directly hires its foreign staff. They are not expatriate workers sent here by the head office in America for a set of time or to do some particular assignment."

Becoming Japanese

Christine goes a step further, pointing out that NML in Sendai not only discourages any notion of there being an expat community at its plant, but any image that it is a foreign company. She asserts, "NML in Sendai is not an American company in Japan. It is an American company trying to become a Japanese company in Japan." Indeed, when one walks into NML's new assembly plant, it is impossible to distinguish it from a Japanese company. NML may be a subsidiary of the U.S. Motorola Inc., but here in Sendai you take your shoes off at the door.

The U.S. electronics giant Motorola Inc. came to Japan back in the early 1960s, and established a trading company for its stateside parent. Now, 30 years later, NML is designing, manufacturing, marketing, and selling throughout Japan semiconductors, cellular phones and radio equipment. The Sendai plant is the most recent addition to NML's two

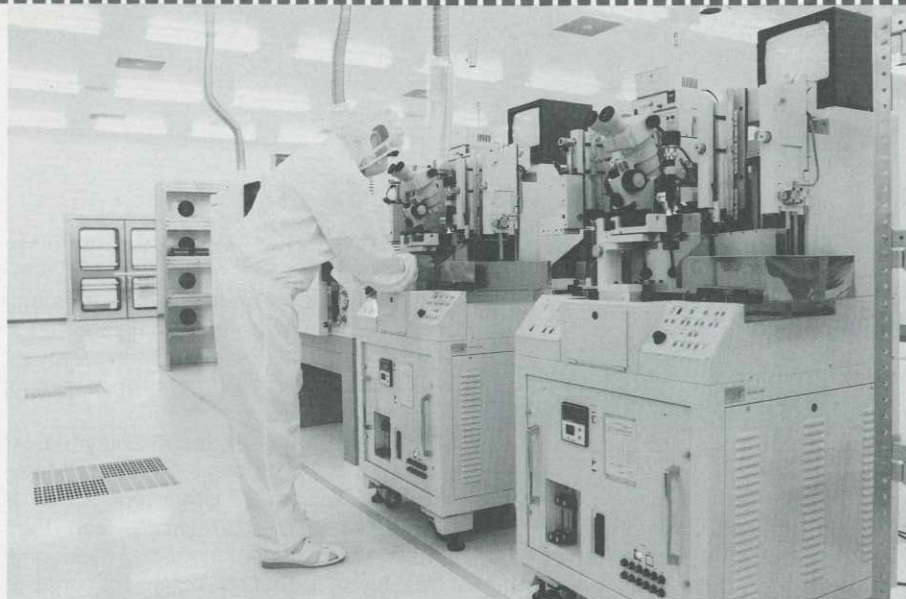
offices in Tokyo, another one in Osaka and a factory in Aizu-wakamatsu, Fukushima Prefecture.

The new Sendai plant has spent its first year concentrating on the assembling of ICs, the "brains" controlling the functions of a wide variety of products including camcorders, cellular phones and car electronics. The plant is primarily involved in manufacturing, and as Japan now seems somewhat the expert in assembly processes, the plant is run in what might be thought of as a Japanese manner.

Working as the finance section manager, Christine finds the rigorous style of Japanese manufacturing overwhelms all sections of this plant. "The Tokyo office is for sales, management and so on, so it's more American style. There's flextime, you can go out for lunch with friends, no uniforms and you don't take off your shoes. But here in this plant there are bells that ring to tell you when to take a break, they tell us in the personnel meeting to try to walk on the right side of the painted lines that are down all the corridors, and also emphasize the importance of saying to your staff 'Ohayo-gozaïmasu' every morning. And also we study the five S's."

Asked what these five S's may be, Christine stumbles over a few badly pronounced Japanese words then says with a laugh, "They are five Japanese words and it's all to do with behavior and maintaining a good working environment... sorry um... I just can't remember them now." With a half-smile on her face, Christine doesn't seem too flustered by a situation she sometimes feels is like "going back to high school."

Later, as Okabe explains the five S's (*seiri, seiton, seiso, seiketsu* and *shitsuke*) and their relation to TPM (total productivity maintenance) and TQC (total quality control), I get the idea that this has more to do with Demming theories than Japanese patterns of behavior. Taking a tour of the plant, an inspection of the



A clean room for inspecting IC chips.

clean room reveals very strict procedures for eliminating even minute dust particles and hair strands from the environment. Another area contains IC testing machines which cost a billion yen each. What Christine interprets as Japanese management style in the Sendai plant may actually be the quality control practices of manufacturers involved in the hugely expensive production of delicate high-tech components.

Sandy Godsey is one of the product engineers at the Sendai plant, and we had a chance to discuss her views of working in Sendai. At the plant, Sandy oversees all production steps from designing and manufacturing to assembling, testing and marketing. While completing her master's degree in electrical engineering at Philadelphia's Drexel University, she spent four months on a Toshiba intern program in Tokyo. Taking up her position at NML in Sendai after graduating, she says her position is "to know a little about each process, to get an overview of everything."

Approach to problems

Sandy studied Japanese for two and a half years during her master's program and feels comfortable with her level. She reads about 650 *kanji* and comprehends about 70% of plant meetings, which are always held in Japanese. It is surprising to hear that Sandy finds communication still a problem. "In Sendai there are not many foreigners, so I talk only in Japanese. But that isn't the problem. The problem is this extended process of com-

munication that goes on. Japanese are focused experts and to me, their communication between each other seems to be rather bad. When I'm working, I can't just get the solution for some problem directly. We must explore all the past histories of it and then the present methods we are trying, and then maybe we come to some suggesting of ideas."

Even though Sandy feels frustrated with this situation, there are some real benefits. "Because I use *nihongo* so much at work, it's of course good for my level. And all those time-consuming discussions I go through with the other (Japanese) staff means I can have a better idea of Japanese people's minds—what they think and how they think. I know so many Americans who came back home and never learned Japanese." She adds as an afterthought, "No wonder American businesses haven't made it here yet."

Christine has been studying hard for the last year or so, and has started to master the Japanese language. Being the only foreigner in her section as well as the manager, Christine has difficulties in delegating work and being accepted as part of the office team. "At the beginning there was a big question of credibility over me. All my staff had worked together at the plant in Aizu-wakamatsu, so I was the outsider who was also young, foreign, a woman and the manager. There was no outward sexism but I was conscious of being excluded... if I made a mistake they were less forgiving. So right from the beginning I made a big effort to learn Japanese and so maybe now I'm accepted as supportive and helpful and

relied upon in the eyes of other staff and managers."

Motorola does require its Japanese management and higher staff to be able to speak English. English lessons are also given once a week at the plant for any NML workers. Christine and Sandy both agree, however, that the Japanese staff in this plant prefer to use Japanese. But it is not only the NML factory that has communication problems. Here in Sendai, the native English speaking population would be no more than 0.2% of the total of one million people. Talking to Christine's staff reveals not only NML workers' opinion, but the attitude of Sendai people in general toward this foreign language. None of Christine's staff are at present studying English. All of them came to the agreement that English was too difficult for them. And besides, none of them could imagine themselves ever going to work in the U.S.

Both Sandy and Christine are amazed when they go to Tokyo and see Japanese people start to talk to them in English rather than in the native language. Christine points out, "Someone (a foreigner) could survive, living and working in Sendai, but it would be no fun." Sandy says, "In Tokyo, there are a lot of foreigners so you don't need *nihongo*, but up here in Sendai if you can't speak Japanese it's an instant barrier between you, the other workers and most of the people in your neighborhood."

Arriving in Sendai, Sandy and her husband James moved into an established suburb about 30 minutes drive from the plant. It takes about 15 minutes to get downtown by car or about 45 minutes by bus and subway. Although their area has supermarkets and some shops, all the restaurants are in town, which sometimes means a ¥2,500 taxi ride. For ¥80,000 (part of which is subsidized by NML), Sandy and James have an apartment with two 6-mat (*tatami*) rooms, one 4.5-mat room, a 12-mat kitchen/dining room, bathroom/toilet plus a parking space. In Sendai, Sandy was pleased to find a variety of places to live, "You have many choices of neighborhoods. You can live downtown or a little bit out in the country like us. You can choose to live in a



Christine Charlet (right) with a group of young colleagues at Nippon Motorola Ltd.

Japanese neighborhood or maybe in one of the new housing estates next to the plant."

Friendly neighbors

Being conversant in Japanese, Sandy was able to settle in well into her "Japanese neighborhood," being scolded only once for a garbage violation by a local old woman. She was surprised at the ease with which she quickly got to know the neighbors. She soon found Japanese language again essential in defending herself against all the "welcome presents" and the shower of hospitality (including a case of blank videotapes from a local Sony salesman). Thinking back, Sandy remembers, "At first, before we got set up, we enjoyed the people next door bringing over jugs of hot water, coffee, tea and nice pastries from a local bakery every morning. But when we brought them something to show our appreciation it soon turned into a war of gifts. It's kind of nice that the neighbors take care of us, even if they're sometimes overly helpful and a little too inquisitive. They're not ashamed at asking anything from 'Where are you from?' to 'How much do you earn?'" Occasionally you get a little tired of them knowing exactly when you come in and out... it's nice and not nice."

Izumi Park Town is a new housing estate on the northern outskirts of Sendai combining residential areas, industrial zones and recreational facilities. Christine and her fiancé live in this housing estate only a few minutes walk from the plant. A golf course is next door to the estate and serves a recreational function as well as being a "green" barrier between Izumi Park Town and the NML and other plants. Their house is quite new, has three bedrooms, a living room, *washitsu* (Japanese-style room), kitchen/dining room

and double parking space; it costs ¥110,000 a month. Christine says, "It's a nice place and there is everything for the families that live there. Schools and other services are well developed. The neighbors are mostly young couples with babies or small kids, but as my fiancé and I both work we don't see them very much."

Sendai, although the biggest city between Tokyo and Sapporo, is still in many ways a big country town. Having a relatively low population density allows Sendai's outer suburbs easy access to the pleasant inner city or out to the countryside. Sophistication versus convenience is the common theme when discussing Sendai's lifestyle.

Christine has found that living out of town makes it easy to get away on the weekend sojourns to the local hot spring resorts and skiing. On the other hand, suburban nightlife is the same as it is in all suburbs. In her native Toulouse in the south of France, going out for dinner with friends was a part of Christine's evenings and her city has a lively and exciting atmosphere. In Sendai, she has to go downtown to find the nightlife, but says, "Sendai is big enough and the subway is convenient to get downtown. It's not like living in Aizu-wakamatsu, which is just too rural. There are all kinds of department stores where I can get whatever I need... and it must be OK because I haven't had to ask my mother to send anything from home yet."

Although finding highway tolls expensive, Sandy has discovered that Sendai is close to both picturesque bays and beaches and to inland mountains which she believes "are just as beautiful as those in the San Francisco area." Sandy talks enthusiastically of the myriad leisure and cultural experiences available in her hometown of Philadelphia as well as most U.S. cities. However, she says, "I really

like going to the Miyagi Art Museum in the city. It has a lot of beautiful traditional Japanese exhibitions. And although I'm really disappointed that there is no ice hockey here, people are always giving us tickets to go skating and the rink is never crowded."

Of the future, it was surprising to hear such positive responses from both Motorolans. The limited career opportunities available in Sendai usually lead to a high turnover of foreigners, most only lasting one to two years. In contrast, Christine and Sandy both express a willingness to complete their five year contracts, looking at it as part of their career with this company.

Pretax average salary for all employees in the Sendai plant, where young recruits aged between 18 to 21 account for 40% of 300 employees, would be some ¥300,000 (approx. \$2,300 at the rate of ¥130/\$) per month including bonuses, plus health insurance and a housing allowance. With her wage higher than this level, Christine believes that Sendai is certainly cheaper to live in than Tokyo and claims to save about the same amount of money as she did when living in the U.S.

Like all foreigners in Sendai, Christine and Sandy complain about the absence of central heating during the colder months from December to March, when average temperatures are from just below zero to eight degrees Celsius. Asked whether they would prefer to live in Tokyo, neither seems to have anything against the idea, but cite the lack of time to enjoy all those great shows and the long commutes as reasons for not moving from Sendai. Christine sums up, "My house is big, clean and modern and it's so easy to get away on weekends. I can get fresh air anytime and the views of the mountains are beautiful. At work, the first year was a struggle and I haven't got everything done that I wanted to yet. So for me, living and working here is probably going to be a challenge that I'll really enjoy... probably for more than just five years." ■

Bradley Cox is a Sendai-based Australian free-lance journalist who has lived in Japan for four years.