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# Internship at Toshiba Medical Systems Corporation: Interim Report

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## Introduction

This report is addressed to the Scholarship Foundation of the Swiss Japanese Commerce Chamber to which I would like to acknowledge gratefully for the important support during my stay in Japan. It contains a summary of my activities in Japan as well as personal impressions acquired during my internship. I hope it will also serve as reference document for future Scholarship Recipients in Japan.

As there are already abundant reports explaining administrative procedures as well as preparations and practical aspects for an internship in Japan, I will focus the following on a description of life and work during what can perhaps be considered an unusual internship in a rural area of Japan.

## My Home: Tochigi-ken, Otawara-shi

### *Where is Tochigi-Ken?*

Most Japanese know this province as one that exists somewhere between Tokyo and Hokkaido and that it is considered one of the many places that make up the 'Inaka' – Countryside.

Tochigi-Ken stretches from the borders of Tokyo about 300km north and is famous for Nikko, a national park known for its temples and mausoleum of an important shogun, its Onsen (hot springs) and also for the ski resorts in the nearby mountains.

I live in Otawara, a town of about 50,000 habitants, situated 200km north of Tokyo. To reach Otawara from Tokyo, one must take a 2 and half our train ride followed by a 40 minutes bus ride. The town, true to the translation of its name (Big Rice Paddy) consists mainly of rice fields, a suburban sprawl, and a few large supermarkets and plenty of pachinko places (game centres).

Surrounding the town, are production sites of Japanese companies such as Nikon, Fujitsu, Bridgestone and Toshiba where I am working.



### *Arrival*

When I arrived in July I was received by the person of Toshiba Medical who was responsible for my internship. He showed me my dormitory and where I was to be working for the next 9 months. From that moment on, everything was well organized – every morning I get on a company bus which leaves at 7:25 in the morning from of the dormitory and brings all employees without independent transportation to the company (35minutes on a crowded road through rice fields). In the evening this bus brings me and the rest of these employees home.

It took me some days to realize where I was; that I had landed in a rural area instead of a big metropolis as I had previously expected. My first free days were dominated by exploring the streets of my town without any maps, getting a bicycle to be able to move around a little bit and find the most important facilities. As the town is spread over a big area and there are almost no signs in English, it took me some time to get used to my new place.

Since arriving I have discovered many new and intriguing places in and around my town and have had plenty of unexpected and unique experiences here.

## **Work with Toshiba Medical**

Toshiba Medical Systems Corporation (TMSC) is one of the worlds leading producer of medical imaging devices with about 3300 employees worldwide. TMSC became independent of Toshiba Group in 2003 and has since then concentrated its core activities in the Nasu Factory in Otawara, where I and 1200 other employees are working. Although the site looks rather modest and small from outside, it is here where the amazing high-tech products are developed, produced and from where sales are coordinated.

I am working in the research and development department for Computed Tomography devices as a member of a group developing applications for computer aided diagnosis.

In the following I will try to give the reader insight in the some aspects of my work with a Japanese company and to highlight some particularities and interesting experiences I have had during my internship.

### ***Internship in a Japanese company***

As the concept of an internship is rather unknown in Japan I am one of the first internship students at Toshiba Medical Systems. The only other internship students I met during my stay were some Japanese university students who spent one or two weeks of their summer holidays here to get an insight into a possible future job. Of course the goals of such internships and my internship of 9 months are different and therefore it took some time to make clear what the purpose of my internship was, what they could expect from a freshly graduated Swiss engineer, and to figure out how to organise my work.

To begin with, my assignments were rather vague, but once I demonstrated my ability to provide results, I was given more precise tasks. Now I work on a very challenging project where it seems that my superiors are interested in my work.

### ***A typical working day***

My day usually starts with breakfast in my dormitory room followed by a 35 minutes bus ride to the company. There are two buses each morning from the dormitory to the company. On the way to the company, the bus picks up workers at several places, which is why it takes quite a while to get to the company. Most of my co-workers have their own cars and commute to work independently. The bus is used by people on business trips and young workers which started working in the company recently.

Once at work, I change into my working uniform and take my place in my cubicle. Although wearing the company uniform is not compulsory, most workers wear at least the blue Toshiba shirt and the brown jacket. In addition to that there are brown trousers, a summer and winter cap, as well as blue-yellow security shoes.

My cubicle is a compartment of 4 square meters contained in a large room with desks for about 200 employees. Locations of cubicles are assigned in order of rank and duration of employment, while also being grouped by departments. Each department consists of a row of desks where the group manager sits in front facing his employees. The employees who have been working for Toshiba for the longest time are assigned places close to the group manager. I, as well as the other freshman (first year employees), sit at the end of the rows.

The working day starts at 8:10 with the “Radio Taiso” (gymnastics which is only done by a few enthusiastic sportsmen) followed by 30 seconds of classical music and some seconds of bird sounds which indicates the beginning of the working day. From then until 12 all people work silently and independently at their places. Usually there is no discussion or socializing with other people during working hours. The only occasions when socializing might take place is in front of the café vending machine or in a glass compartment in the centre of the room where smokers can go for a little break.

From 12:00 to 13:00 the whole factory takes a lunch break. Everyone rushes to the cafeteria at five past twelve and then must wait in line for 20 minutes to get their lunch. Once one’s food is bought and a spot to eat can be found, each lunch is eaten in an impressive speed to make space for the next people who would like to sit down. Lunch usually finishes around 12:35 and then employees will socialize with members of the company that joined in the same year as themselves.

After another Radio Taiso, work restarts at one. Employees will then work until their superiors deem it sufficient. A regular working day finishes at five, but a need for overtime work is common and often must be done until seven or even nine or ten. So most workers do not have time for activities after work and go directly home to eat and sleep. As an internship student I am excluded from doing overtime work, which means that I usually get home at 6 and have time for some activities in the evenings.

## ***Working Environment***

I am member of a project group of 4 persons which develops software for computer aided diagnosis. Each group member works on his own project and there is usually a group meeting once a week. At this meeting results are presented and also problems and future tasks are discussed. Other than this weekly meeting, everyone works independently in his own compartment.

Working on my own project gave me the possibility to see the latest developments in my field of work, to teach myself a lot of new techniques and to develop my own ideas. But on the other hand, I missed the opportunity to exchange ideas with other group members.

As there are very few foreign engineers working in my department, meetings and discussions are held in Japanese. But all my co-workers are very helpful and patient in explaining things to me that I can not understand in Japanese and in answering any questions I may have. Most people speak some English, but as they do not have many opportunities to use their language skills, conversations are sometimes rather difficult.

## ***Highlights in my company life***

### **Obon-Matsuri**

One day about 3 weeks after I started my internship, my co-workers told me to come to the company gym hall, where a rather surprising event took place. About 100 workers were standing in a circle and 5 old ladies in kimonos gave an introductory lesson in Bon-Odori, the traditional dance for the summer festival in Otawara.

The day after, all people motivated to dance were brought by bus to the town, and equipped with the Toshiba festival clothes. Then we danced for about 2



hours in a parade through town. Of course all other companies in town also had their dancing groups and we did our best to dance better and shout louder than all the other teams.

### **Bohnenkai**

Another important event in company life was the End-Year-Party in December. In my department this was an especially big event which took place in a traditional hotel in the nearby mountains. Every year the company freshmen have to organize a performance for this event. We started our preparations about 2 months before this party, with meetings after work and many Excel charts designed to show how to make a nice party. Finally we got the whole event planned to the last minute and the last weeks before the party I spent every evening with 2 other freshmen practising for our performance.

Finally all the preparation efforts were awarded by a very long party including relaxing at the Onsen, a good dinner, karaoke, Japanese games and drinking until the morning with my colleagues transforming from quiet Japanese workers into impressive karaoke performers.

### **End-Year-Cleaning**

Traditionally Japanese company workers clean their offices on the last working day of the year. So on the last day of work, everyone was equipped with cleaning tools on their way to the office and all the engineers of the Toshiba Medical Strategic Technologies Department spent a whole morning removing dust from their computers and putting their working places in order. After the cleaning was finished, everyone was treated to a piece of cake and a juice to celebrate the end of the working year; and each person returned to his cubicle to eat his cake in silence.

## **Life in a small Japanese town**

Although Otawara has approximately 50,000 habitants, it is a calm place. There is no real city centre, but rather a lot of small, relatively new buildings; the liveliest places are the shopping centres outside town. In the evenings the whole town becomes silent, there are few lights in the streets and people usually spend their time at home. Therefore, I found it difficult to meet people here at the beginning.

### ***Social Life***

In the first months I spent most of my time with my colleagues from the dormitory. Usually company workers form a group with the employees who entered the company the same year. On my arrival I was very well received by my co-workers; I was quickly introduced to many people who were glad to meet someone from another country in this place. There were many common activities like going for dinner after work, sports activities and small trips on weekends. But recently, the training period in the company has ended, and my new friends were expected to become real Toshiba employees. This means that overtime work became “a must” and time for common activities became rare.

Being one of the few foreigners in this town has its advantages when trying to meet new people. They are normally rather surprised to meet someone “different” in their small town of Otawara and once they see that I can communicate in Japanese, most of them are very open, helpful and curious about what I am doing here. I had a lot of interesting and surprising conversations with people of all ages in the streets, the supermarket or in one of the few bars. Usually they do not speak a lot of English, so I get a lot of opportunities to practise my Japanese. Of course there are also people who are rather afraid of speaking with a foreigner and prefer walking away quickly when I try to ask them something. But generally I have had very good experiences with the people in Otawara and was surprised how open and friendly most of them are.

During my time here I made some good friends mainly by meeting people per coincidence in bars or just somewhere on the street. I found friends to do sports with on the weekends and I gotten to know a lot of real Otawara citizens, whom I meet with from time to time in the bars of the town.

I think that living in such a small town gives big advantage to meeting Japanese people and having the chance to improve language skills. In contrast to life in a bigger city where I would be anonymous, I often meet people I know in the streets and am surprised to see that people recognise me when I enter shops or restaurants. It can, also, however, be a bit frustrating when weeks pass having always to be the outsider and to need to concentrate fully simply to communicate. One of the disadvantages of being one of a few foreigners in largely homogenous Japanese population is that there are less chances to meet people with whom to speak English or an another language where communication demands less effort than speaking Japanese.

## ***The Company Dormitory***

Almost all Toshiba employees of my company have spent their first years with the company living in 'Creare', the company's dormitory. Once people get married, they usually move into small apartments, which are also subsidized by the company. When they have their own families, customarily they buy their own houses in the surrounding villages. As a result, the dormitories' inhabitants are mostly young employees in their first years with the company or older unmarried men.

The dormitory is a large complex situated outside the town. It has 200 rooms equipped with the necessary furniture, a minimalist bath, a refrigerator and a TV set – all one needs during life outside the working place. In addition to that there is a small kitchen on each floor and a recreation room with a TV and an extensive collection of Manga and some video games.

Dormitory rules are rather strict; no visitors except family members are allowed in the rooms, girls and boys live on different floors with interdiction on visiting each other, one's presence is controlled by a time card system and longer absences for example on weekend must be announced to the dormitory manager. But on the other hand, the atmosphere is rather familiar with the dormitory manager called 'Otoosan' (father) by everyone. The Otoosan takes care that we all catch the bus in the morning and his wife receives us with homemade cookies after days of hard work.

Although a lot of people live together, there are very few common activities in my dormitory. Most people come home late after working overtime, go to their rooms to eat a microwave lunch bought on the way home and go to sleep in order to be ready for the next working day. From time to time people gather in the entrance lobby to have a beer after work, but this event is quite and rare and the only social activity at the dormitory during a working day.

As most employees do not spend much more time than is needed for sleeping at the dormitory, people usually appreciate it for its good organisation, the cleaning service and privacy in their own rooms. Accustomed to living with other people, I found the dormitory a bit too calm in the beginning, but fortunately there are some exceptions from time to time. Once in a while, I will organise a Swiss dinner or have my colleagues teach me some Japanese cooking. Also quite recently I will sometimes meet with my colleagues in the recreation room for playing games.



### ***Free-time activities***

In the contrast to Tokyo, where every free time activity is available, choices here are quite limited. In addition to that, it is rather difficult to access information on events or sport facilities. But once living here for a while and constantly asking around, I was able to find Japanese classes in my village, a language exchange partner, sports facilities and some good places to spend time after work. My usual activities in the evenings include studying Japanese, jogging in the rice fields, exploring the many Onsen in the area, going to eat with my co-workers and meeting Japanese friends in the cafés here in town.

On weekends I spend most of my time travelling and discovering new places in Japan. Being fond of outdoor sports, I have been discovering the mountains around my town, been surfing and snowboarding, and recently have found some people with whom to do mountaineering. With them, I had the opportunity to go to some exciting places in the Japanese Alps.

Although I do not have access to all the spectacular places and events one may have in a big Japanese city, there are plenty of other possibilities here. Here, I think, I have had the opportunity of experiencing many unique things which would have been difficult to seek out had I been living in a big city.

## Conclusions

Looking back on my time in Japan, I can say that my internship here has been much different than I expected it would be – and this is exactly what I was looking for when I came to Japan. I wanted to discover a very different country and its culture and to see how people live and think in another place.

Living and working in Otawara gave me the opportunity to meet many Japanese people and to live the life of a Japanese company worker. Being immersed in a very unusual environment, it was sometimes difficult to appreciate its particularities, but reflecting on the last months I realize how many enriching experiences I have had during my stay here. I have seen many curious and unexpected aspects of life in Japan and from these I have formed many new ideas about how things can be done differently.

Through my internship I have learned a lot about biomedical engineering and now have insight into how a Japanese company works. It is very interesting to see the environment in which some of Japan's high tech products are developed and to participate in this process.

Finally I would like to thank the Swiss Japanese Commerce Chamber for their support which helped me to make this experience and to encourage future internship students to go for their own "Japan Adventure". It may not always be easy to live in such a different place and to follow the Japanese way of doing things, but it allows for a chance to discover plenty of interesting and surprising aspects of this culture, to meet new people, to get new ideas and it leads to curious experiences almost everyday.