

The Next Level

News, Secrets and Insights from Your
Sports and Games Translator

Tokyo Pt. 1: Warm Welcomes and
Keyboard Cushions

Tales from the Motherland of Shrines and Games

In summer 2006, I spent 6 weeks working in one of the most contradictory countries in the world on the German localization of a prestigious RPG project. The job involved everything from familiarization to translation and bug fixing on site for a global player in the video game industry. The assignment brought me to Tokyo, where tradition and technology clash like nowhere else in the world. Not until now, some 6 years later, do I feel mentally able to digest my experiences from the Land of the Rising Sun. I'd like to kick off this newsletter series with an outsider's first-hand observations of Japanese business life.

On arrival at Tokyo airport, I received a textbook welcome to the Land of Thousand Smiles. At the exit, I and the French translator colleague I had stumbled upon at the baggage claim were welcomed by a friendly and improbably cute project assistant named Shizuka.

She fulfilled all of our Western long-nosed stereotypes of the young Japanese employee: petite, shy, polished and eager to please. She showed us around Tokyo, provided us with subway passes, and even gave us a class on how to use them, including how to put the bills into the ticket vending machine, what subway lines to take, and how to operate the turnstiles.



After a solid 3-hour introduction to the Tokyo subway system, the downtown shops and eateries, and detailed instructions on how to get to and from the company office where we'd be working, we were left in the hands of our half-American, half-Japanese project coordinator, Robin. The American Robin welcomed us with a bone-rattling handshake, and the Japanese Robin picked up where his preternaturally kind assistant left off.

After dinner in an upscale restaurant (Robin picked up the tab), more sightseeing around town, and arrival at the Tokyo Inn, I was beginning to wonder whether we had not been the lucky victims of some fortunate mix up. When we were politely presented as Thorsten-san and Xavier-san at the reception desk and handed the keys to our comfortable rooms, the field trip feeling had reached its peak. It just couldn't get any better than this – or so we thought.

Before leaving us to ourselves and our rooms, Robin said, "Ah well. Working times are from 11am to 6pm. We have to adapt to the time difference to cooperate with our central offices in London. I hope you don't mind." Our jaws dropped. Employee paradise had a name, and it was Tokyo.

Were they really that lazy over here? Or just so smart that they didn't have to work more than 6 hours a day to be just as efficient as us Westerners. But this was only the first day, and the surprises had just begun...

The next day we got set up in our cubicles. Our second Japanese workday was devoted to another introduction, this time into the company network. Our task was simply to play around a bit and familiarize ourselves with the network. I fiddled around some with the bug fixing system, then glanced across the corridor into the open side of the neighboring cubicle. The woman who worked there was slumped over with her head on the table – fast asleep and slightly snoring. I wondered whether I ought to wake her up in case the project coordinator came by and caught her napping on the job. I thought better of it and instead left her there dozing and headed for the coordinator's cubicle about 15 meters away to see whether Robin was around. If not, I'd just let the woman sleep on. I peeked around the corner and saw Robin's black head resting on the keyboard. He too was snoring. I made a tactical retreat and went on playing with the bug fixing software.

An hour later, the Girl Next Door was awake again. It was actually the first time I saw a Japanese girl with wrinkles on her face - not from age, but from her keyboard. Deep red impressions lined her cheek. She glanced at me with a dopey smile, put on her glasses and went back to work. Two minutes later, our coordinator Robin dropped by to ask whether everything was okay, having just risen from his own makeshift keyboard cushion, yawning and displaying the same telltale grid on his cheek.

It took a week for me to learn that the Japanese do not regard sleeping at your desk as a sign of laziness or disrespect. On the contrary, those guys work so hard that nodding off at your desk is just natural. It is widely viewed as a sign of dedication to the job. As a matter of fact, a Japanese-German colleague told me he even kept a sleeping bag and a tooth brush stowed away under his desk for busy periods when the workload required putting in some extra shifts. I guess the Japanese wouldn't get our clichéd jokes about German bureaucrats sleeping on the job...

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