The Midwest-Japan Economic Relationship: A Step Forward … Virtually

I hope my message finds all our dear friends in good health in the New Year. What a very trying experience 2020 has been for us. The last time I had a chance to see and meet with my dear friends in Chicago’s Japan business community was at the residence of Consul-General Kenichi Okada on March 13. It was a heartwarming gathering which I think of often.

Japan is #1. As of 2019, Japan’s $644 billion in direct investment in the United States makes it the leader in foreign direct investment (FDI). In comparison, Canada’s direct investment in the U.S. was $580 billion, followed by Germany at $522 billion and the United Kingdom at $446 billion. This is very compelling news. Undoubtedly, through the expansion of new and existing investment and by merger and acquisition, Japan’s direct investment in the U.S economy increased by 168.5% during the past 10 years. Again, Japan is #1, the leading foreign investor in America. (See Portfolios of Large FDI Sources: 2019, on page 6).

To expand and strengthen our relationships between Japanese companies and American state governments we are creating a JETRO Digital Investment Initiative in

By Tsubasa Hashimoto, Director of Public Affairs, JETRO Chicago

JETRO North America has hosted 57 business related webinars since March. All JETRO offices have been making their best efforts to share important information among Japanese companies in a timely manner. While we did many webinars, the August 12th webinar was very special. It was the first webinar ever that featured speakers from a state government with Japanese companies. The title was “JETRO-IEDC-JASI: Back on Track Webinar for Japanese Companies in IN: State of Indiana Leadership and Japanese Companies’ Update During COVID-19”.

The webinar began with Jim Schellinger, Secretary of Commerce for the State of Indiana who sent a warm message to Japanese companies in Indiana. A follow-up questionnaire was provided to all attendees and we received the following comment: “His message was a highlight of the webinar for me. I did not expect such a kind message. I felt relieved knowing we are warmly welcomed by the state government of Indiana.” The presentation by Andrea Richter-Garry, Vice President of International Engagement, Indiana Economic Development Corporation (IEDC) followed. The information provided by her was essential for Japanese companies to keep their operations running during this difficult time.

The update presentations made by Japanese OEM companies in Indiana included: Subaru of Indiana Automotive, Inc.; Toyota Motor Manufacturing Indiana, Inc.; and Honda Manufacturing of Indiana, LLC. Each provided extremely insightful information to the attendees so they could learn about their situations and safety protocols, as well as the successful know-how to operate a factory safely. In fact, we received a comment from an audience member saying, “We could take-away several key factors from the OEM presentations, which can be practiced from tomorrow.”

We would like to take this opportunity to extend our appreciation to each speaker that participated in the webinar, as well as Theresa Kulczak, Executive Director, Japan America Society of Indiana (JASI)

See “Chief Executive Director,” page 6

JETRO/IEDC/JASI Webinar Presents Indiana’s Japanese Companies’ Plans to get “Back on Track”

See “Back on Track,” page 5
Jconnect Webinar Series Continues to Explore Timely Business Topics

Prepared by Kevin Kalb, JETRO Chicago

The Jconnect webinar series created by JETRO Chicago began in late May to try to help facilitate partnerships between innovative Midwestern startups and Japanese businesses across the U.S. in a variety of industry areas. The program has grown with cooperation of our North American JETRO offices to include startups from around the U.S. and Canada to share their technologies and disruptive innovations to Japanese businesses.

In mid-September, the Jconnect series featured the industry topic of Cybersecurity. This webinar had only two speakers, Cog Systems and accentedge, both from Chicago. The speakers discussed how they are developing the cybersecurity framework and technologies for the next generation of government, business, and personal needs.

On October 1st, the series featured the topic of Blockchain, which can be described as a distributed ledger technology enabling secure, recorded transactions. Three companies developing blockchain technologies to streamline future supply chains and disrupt IT were featured, including Northwestern University spinout bloxRoute, DLT Labs of Toronto, Ontario, and Zero Hash, also based in Chicago.

The most recent Jconnect webinar on October 22nd featured the topic of Robotics AI/Software, showcasing startups developing cutting-edge, universal operating systems for industrial robots and autonomous mobility systems, as well as AI-driven, fully autonomous security robots. Based in Columbus, Ohio, READY Robotics presented their easy-to-use, universal programming platforms for industrial and collaborative robots, called Forge O/S. APEX AI, based in Palo Alto, California, highlighted their operating system for autonomous vehicles that allows developers to implement complex AI software. SMP Robotics, based in Sausalito, California, presented an overview of their AI-driven security and inspection robots.

As an ongoing series, the next webinar was on December 8th and featured companies presenting under the theme of Supply Chain Automation. For more information, please check out the Jconnect landing page on the JETRO USA website for upcoming webinar registration details, and to view recordings of all of the previous webinars mentioned above.

Look for news about upcoming Jconnect webinars plus recordings of previous events at the Jconnect landing page: https://www.jetro.go.jp/usa/events/jconnect-webinars-chicago.html
JETRO/Michigan Webinars Promote the State to Japanese Companies

Prepared by Tsubasa Hashimoto, Director of Public Affairs, JETRO Chicago

JETRO Chicago conducted a series of two webinars with the State of Michigan, for Japanese companies to gain a better understanding of what Michigan has to offer.

We organized these webinars to respond to the needs of Japanese expatriates in the State of Michigan and to potential investors in Japan. They said the opportunity to deepen the understanding of the State of Michigan is now limited due to COVID-19. We believe it is important to update the Japanese business community about Michigan, in a timely manner. These webinars were conducted on October 30 and November 19, 2020.

At the first webinar, Andy Saito, JETRO Michigan Correspondent explained the history, culture, industries and the quality of life in Michigan. He also discussed the trends of Japanese investment. This general information was well received, especially from Japanese expats who have just arrived in Michigan. Next, Ted Kawashima, Director of the Japan Auto Parts Industries Association (JAPIA) explained the special relationship between the auto industry and Michigan. We learned that there are many factual reasons why Michigan is now called the world center of the auto industry.

Shosaku Ueda, Executive Director and Secretary of the Japan Business Society of Detroit (JBSD), introduced his organization looking back on its path from the history of its beginning to the future. The story highlighted that the now thriving relationship between the Japanese business community and the State of Michigan took a long time to achieve, but certainly worth all of the hard work and dedication.

The Second webinar was co-organized by the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC).

I would like to take this opportunity to extend our sincere appreciation to Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer for sending her heartwarming message to Japan. The message expressed the State’s commitment and appreciation for the relationship with Japan. The audience very much understood that Japanese companies are welcomed and can grow in Michigan. One audience member stated in the survey that was distributed, “I was happy that I selected Michigan to establish my U.S. business. The governor’s message was just so powerful.”

We were grateful for having the participation of Drew Coleman, Director, Foreign Direct Investment, MEDC. He made an insightful presentation about the State and MEDC. We were also thankful for having the participation of four regional economic development organizations; Marcia Gebarowski, Director, Business Development, Ann Arbor SPARK; Robert Corder, Vice President, Attraction & Development, Battle Creek Unlimited (BCU); Alan Weber, Vice President, Global Investment & Trade, Detroit Regional Partnership (DRP); and Brent Case, Vice President, Business Attraction, The Right Place.

Since there is not the same type of organizations in Japan, the Japanese are not familiar with state and regional economic development organizations. It is necessary for them to know the mission and activities of economic development organizations. I was pleased to receive comments from the Japanese audience in Michigan saying this webinar was a good introduction. One particular member indicated “I did not know there are such helpful organizations near me.”

The final presentation was made by Trevor Pawl, Chief Mobility Officer, MEDC - Office of Future Mobility and Electrification. His presentation was an update of the mobility policy for the State of Michigan. His message was persuasive to assist everyone in attendance with understanding that the world center of the auto industry is now rapidly developing a Mobility Ecosystem partnering with companies, academia and communities. This policy was new to the audience, and so many comments appraised his presentation.

Lastly, I would like to thank all individuals and organizations that made these events happen. I would like to extend a special thank you to Consul-General Tsutomu Nakagawa for his support and kind remarks for both events. Through the series of webinars, I hope the State of Michigan is able to develop closer and stronger relationships with the Japanese business community. I also hope that the Japanese companies who are in Michigan, realize how special the environment is and they continue to grow their businesses.
From New York City to Columbus ... New Sushi Restaurant in Dublin, Ohio

Prepared by Kikuko Hanashiro, JETRO Grassroots Outreach Coordinator in Ohio

There are several ramen noodle restaurants and many sushi restaurants in central Ohio. I have been seeing Japanese food getting more and more popular. However, most of the Japanese owned restaurants have been closed due to the retirement of the owner-chefs in central Ohio.

As of December 2020, Japanese native sushi chef, Seigo Nishimura, who used to work in New York City was preparing for the opening of his second restaurant, Kintsugi Sushi Bar at Dublin’s new North Market Bridge Park.

Ohio ranks in the top five in the U.S., having 254 Japanese companies and more than 13,000 Japanese living in the state.

Since it is important for Japanese business communities, I interviewed the owner of the restaurant. He chose Ohio expecting its continuous growth of the economy and the increase of people’s interest in Japan.

Hanashiro: What is the biggest difference between your customers in New York City and Columbus, Ohio?

Nishimura: The restaurant business is very competitive in NYC. With many celebrity chefs and famous sushi restaurants, customers’ expectations range from quick and easy to the highest-end sushi imaginable — and they are willing to pay accordingly. In Columbus, although sushi is increasingly popular, many people are still uncomfortable eating raw fish. They tend to order what they are comfortable eating, such as tuna, salmon and California rolls. However, authentic sushi has so much more to offer. I would like to introduce more of a variety of sushi to the Columbus community, such as Chirashi and Temaki, to help foster more appreciation for this important Japanese culinary art.

H: How did you choose Columbus, Ohio?

N: I compared several Midwest cities before choosing Columbus, Ohio for my first restaurant, Satori Ramen Bar. The population of Columbus has been steadily increasing and this trend is expected to continue. As the population grows, so does the economy, creating the perfect opportunity for introducing something new without saturating the market. Also, my wife is from Ohio and her family is in the area, so I gained insight from them on how receptive and supportive Columbus is to foster new and diverse businesses.

H: Were there any difficulties finding the location?

N: My first restaurant, Satori Ramen Bar, is located at the North Market. Because it is well-established with over 100 years of history and popularity, it is very competitive to get a spot there. When I applied, there were a couple of spots available. The process was lengthy to get approval — my application was under review for over three months before we could even get an interview with a tasting menu. When the board finally approved my application it was a huge relief. For a first restaurant, the advantage of affiliation with such a great organization meant we had customers from day one — more than we could have ever imagined.

H: How do you feel about diverse customers?

N: I have lived and worked in both Japan and all over the U.S. and traveled all over the world in my previous career, so I am very much at home with diverse customers. In NYC, there are so many different cultures and languages. Some people I worked with and served could not speak English, but we worked around it. While there is less diversity in Ohio than other places I have been, and the majority of people I meet here probably are not very adventurous with sushi, I view it as an opportunity, not just a challenge. The more exposure to diversity — culture, language, food, traditions — the richer life can be. I am excited to help make sushi and Japanese traditions more accessible and to foster the understanding and respect that is needed for communities to thrive in diversity.

H: There are over 2500 Japanese people living in Dublin the area. Are they your main target customers?

N: Not at all. Even though there are many Japanese people in Dublin, they are only a small percentage of the overall population. My larger objective is to introduce an authentic Japanese sushi restaurant to more people in Ohio. Of course, I aim to attract Japanese customers by offering authenticity and good service, as well. And if Japanese customers like my restaurant, Ohioans will know they can trust in my restaurant’s quality and authenticity.

My first restaurant, Satori Ramen Bar, is located in the North Market downtown, but Kintsugi Sushi Bar will be in Dublin’s North Market Bridge Park. Dublin is home to the largest Japanese population in the area and people in Dublin may be more accustomed to sushi than those in other areas. As with Satori Ramen Bar, I am always assessing trends in the market and tweaking the menu to best satisfy our customers. When the COVID-19 pandemic started, take-out orders increased significantly. With that in mind, I have adjusted the Kintsugi Sushi Bar menu to better accommodate takeout, as well. This is an ongoing process and as trends change, I will keep adjusting proactively to give our customers what they want.

Seigo Nishimura Profile

Born in Tokyo, Japan
2006: Graduated from Texas A&M University
2012: Transferred to same company in Tokyo, Japan office
2015: Graduated from Tokyo Sushi Academy
2016: Moved to NYC and worked as a sous chef at Michelin-starred Cagen Japanese restaurant
2017: Moved to Columbus, Ohio
2019: Opened Satori Ramen Bar in North Market in downtown Columbus, Ohio in June
2020: Satori Ramen Bar selected as one of Columbus Monthly’s Best New Restaurants (March)
2021: Open Kintsugi Sushi Bar at North Market Bridge Park in Dublin, Ohio
JETRO’s COVID-19 Response Site includes Three New Videos

Even as the COVID-19 pandemic continues, business finds ways to adapt and incorporate new practices.

Now, as part of JETRO’s in-depth COVID-19 information center, three informational videos have been posted, in a series entitled “With and Beyond COVID-19: Business Opportunities in Japan.” Learn how foreign companies operating in Japan are changing their businesses during this unusual time. Look for the videos at https://www.jetro.go.jp/en/invest/.


Illinois-based Wellspring Worldwide Inc. Establishes Japan Subsidiary

Wellspring Worldwide Inc., a leading company providing a platform dedicated to innovation, recently established a Japanese subsidiary in Tokyo.

Wellspring Worldwide Inc., founded in 2003, is an Illinois-based company that develops and provides the world’s most popular innovation platform for managing and executing technology transfer and technology scouting. Wellspring is a spin-off of Carnegie Mellon University, which was ranked the world’s No.1 in computer science.

Conventionally, technology transfer and scouting were inefficient manual processes, because there was no automation in their management system. To address this problem, Wellspring Worldwide Inc. has developed two integrated management systems, “Wellspring” and “Sophia,” for corporate and academic institutions, enabling users to manage the entire process, from the selection of technologies and potential technology partners to investment decision, evaluation, and acquisition. In addition, institutions and companies that implement these systems can actually transfer, license, and scout technologies and intellectual property through “Scout,” a technology search and analysis system that boasts the worlds largest and most accurate database. The 94 of the top 100 universities by research spending in the U.S. use Wellspring’s systems, and by major Japanese companies and universities as well.

In December 2019, the company incorporated Wellspring Japan GK in Tokyo in order to strengthen its customer support services and acquire new customers. In April 2020, Wellspring Japan set up an office and began business operations on a full-scale.

Upon establishing the company in Japan, JETRO’s Invest Japan Business Support Center (IBSC) provided temporary office rentals, provided consultation (registration, tax, and labor), and introduced service providers (certified legal specialist for company registration, tax accountants, social insurance and labor consultants, banks, and service office agency).

For more information about Wellspring’s success, visit https://www.jetro.go.jp/en/invest/newsroom/2020/1cbc4c834d1a2905.html.

For more information on how your company can utilize JETRO’s Invest Japan Business Support Center, contact the JETRO Chicago office.
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2021. We simply cannot allow the COVID-19 pandemic to create a communication gap between U.S. states and Japan. Our new initiative enables a state's leadership to make detailed digital investment presentations to Japanese companies interested in expanding to the U.S. We at JETRO are pleased to bring all state governments to Japan, virtually. In this manner, when American state government leaders can safely visit Tokyo, our Digital Investment Initiative will have already created relationships for them within Japan’s business community.

During the pandemic, we learned the importance of conveying timely information and to keep a dialogue open between state governments and Japanese companies. This year, we worked closely with the Indiana Economic Development Corporation (IEDC) and the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC), to co-organize webinars allowing Japanese companies to obtain an understanding of the investment environments in these states during the healthcare crisis. Concerning our webinar with the State of Indiana, we invited representatives from Honda Manufacturing of Indiana LLC, Subaru of Indiana Automotive and Toyota Motors Manufacturing Indiana and asked them to explain how they are managing their operations under these severe healthcare conditions, so all attendees could listen and learn. (See related IEDC article). The state of Indiana representatives and the managers from these large Japanese companies want to be helpful and they want to communicate. We realized that dialogue builds confidence for all and information sharing is vital for businesses during this time of crisis.

Throughout the course of the summer, I virtually interacted with many of Ohio’s local leaders to get to know them and listen to them speak about Japan. These meetings were so productive that our team published a special booklet, The Japan – Ohio Investment Dynamic – How Local Leaders Envision Japan. I encourage you to read the English or Japanese versions, both capture the authentic voices of numerous Ohio leaders as they work to develop a closer relationship with Japan. (See the Link at right)

Our team’s digital agility allowed us to do numerous practical business assistance webinars with Japanese companies in the United States and Japan. Experts within our own JETRO network of business contacts spoke on topics such as the CARES ACT, the Payment Protection Program and the Executive Order on Non-Immigrant Visas, which allowed us to efficiently communicate with and help numerous Japanese companies throughout the year. As political and economic transitions in the United States take place in 2021, we will continue with our webinar outreach programs to assist Japanese companies on a variety of business related issues.

Our team developed a new Jconnect series of webinars for innovative Chicago and Midwest startup companies to present to Japanese businesses. Jconnect webinars are designed to provide a digital platform to local startups to present their business models and technologies to an audience of primarily Japanese companies. JETRO’s Jconnect concept has grown and now allows startup communities throughout the United States and Canada to reach out to potential business partners in Japan and throughout the United States (see Jconnect Webinar article on page 2). Importantly, just after the New Year we will focus on the digital promotion of Japanese Sake, Wagyu beef and additional food products/ingredients.

Many want to forget the trauma of 2020. I have already heard the refrain, “Let’s put this terrible year behind us.” That is the nature of Americans, we always need to move forward. However, we can never forget what happened this past year. As we move into 2021, we move with a deep sense of caution and reasons for hope, but also with a strong realization that we have much work ahead to make our society healthy and peaceful. I wish you good health and much happiness in 2021.


Recommend the JETRO Chicago Midwest Newsletter to a colleague, so they can keep up with the latest news, events and ideas that are helping Midwest companies develop businesses in Japan and with Japanese companies. For a FREE subscription delivered quarterly via e-mail, send name, title, company/organization name, address, phone number and e-mail address to Kelly_Highland@jetro.go.jp