

# Learning on the Job

Introducing two foreign residents of Japan who, like many, spoke no Japanese at all on their arrival but who are picking up the language while succeeding in their jobs.

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The Government of Japan has adopted a preferential immigration policy for foreigners who speak Japanese, including a system that provides bonus points commensurate with the level of their language proficiency as defined by the point-based system for highly skilled foreign professionals<sup>1</sup>. A number of Japanese companies require a certain level of proficiency in Japanese when it comes to hiring foreign nationals. Meanwhile, there are many foreign residents successfully living in Japan with proficiency in Japanese acquired after they arrived here. Kashish Chawla, from Delhi, India, and Alex Silverman, from South Carolina in the United States, are two examples.

### Kashish Chawla

Kashish Chawla was hired in India by Hikari Tsushin, one of the leading distributors in the telecommunications industry with approximately 10,000 employees engaged in a wide range of business activities including sales of mobile phones and office automation equipment, and insurance services. After graduating from college there, Chawla came to Japan in September 2014 at the age of 21.

“I had never been abroad before I came to Japan. On top of that, it was the biggest challenge for me to live in Japan, which is so different from India in terms of its living culture,” says Chawla. “At the time, I felt that it would not be possible for me to learn to

speak Japanese.”

When Chawla started working as a software engineer in Tokyo, he had few colleagues who could speak English in his office. He received Japanese lessons in the office every morning but felt that he was not making any progress during the first two months. He even began to think about going back to India. One day, Chawla’s boss was kind enough to host a birthday dinner for him. The thoughtful advice of his boss encouraged Chawla to become even more serious about the language training.

“I seized every possible opportunity to speak Japanese, not only in the office but also at various social gatherings at the company. This really helped me to achieve a significant improvement in my language skills,” says Chawla. “I found it easy to make friends



Kashish Chawla  
Photo: Tadashi Aizawa

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<sup>1</sup> The Points-based System for Highly Skilled Foreign Professionals is a system that provides highly skilled foreign professionals with preferential immigration treatment. Foreign nationals with strong proficiency in the Japanese language as proven by test results are eligible for additional points (see pages 8–9).

with people everywhere, because Japanese people are so friendly in general.”

Meanwhile Chawla made every effort to improve operations in his line of work. Unlike the stereotypical image that he previously had of Japanese companies in general, Hikari Tsushin was quick to make business decisions, with a receptive organizational culture on attitudes toward different opinions. About a year later, he was promoted to a manager’s position with thirteen Japanese subordinates reporting to him. Since last year, Chawla has been involved with activities related to business operation improvements, corporate research and M&A opportunities both in Japan and abroad in cooperation with seven subordinates from India and top executives.

“I did not expect that I would be offered such an opportunity to work on a significant assignment like the current one after spending two and a half years with the company,” says Chawla. “I would like to have a family in Japan in the future. It is my dream to establish a local subsidiary of the company in India.”

### Alex Silverman

Alex Silverman is from South Carolina in the United States. When Silverman was in college, he took a course on the history of Japanese art, and that led him to develop an interest in Japan. Later, he chose to apply for the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme, a Japanese government initiative that invites native speakers of English to Japan as Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) and foreigners as Coordinators for International Relations (CIRs).

“I love traveling. I wanted to leave America and experience the world,” says Silverman, “I had a keen interest in Japanese art. And I was intrigued by photographs of beautiful scenery in Japan that can be found on the web.”

After graduating from college, he came to Japan in August 2014 and began working as an ALT teaching English at Wako Kokusai High School in Wako, Saitama Prefecture on the outskirts of Tokyo. This high school is known for its educational programs related to foreign languages, with Silverman and the other ALTs (eight in total) from seven different coun-



Alex Silverman  
Photo: Masatoshi Sakamoto

tries teaching foreign languages there. Their home countries include the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Tunisia, Germany, Spain and China.

Silverman teaches eighteen hours a week. In the early days of his teaching career, he imitated his senior ALTs’ teaching style. Later, he gradually established his own teaching style through trial and error.

“Teaching is challenging, but it is definitely a lot of fun as well. Whenever I feel a connection with the students, I have a great sense of accomplishment,” says Silverman. “I was truly pleased when I received a heartfelt letter from my students saying, ‘We enjoyed your class.’”

Silverman did not speak a word of Japanese before he came to Japan. He finds it somewhat frustrating that he does not have much spare time to learn Japanese because he is quite busy with teaching, but his Japanese is good enough to manage his everyday life comfortably here.

“The Japanese language is difficult, but that’s not a problem. I have been able to overcome it. I also feel there are enough English-language services,” says Silverman. “Coming to Japan was the best decision of my life. I would like to stay in Japan at least until the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2020.”