

Meet the Manager

In this profile BNY Mellon head of Japanese equities Miyuki Kashima explains how a ruinous phone bill led to a life in asset management...



Miyuki Kashima

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BNY Mellon Asset Management
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Over 30 years' experience

Joined BNY Mellon Asset
Management Japan*, April 2013.

How did you first get into the industry?

It was completely unplanned. After my undergraduate degree I decided to come back from Canada to Japan for a gap year before pursuing a qualification in law. It was only after I got here that I realized how incredibly expensive everything was. The reikin¹ we had to pay on our apartment was a big chunk of money and even just to get a phone line installed cost US\$800! It wasn't long before I was completely broke and decided I needed to get a job – any job; and soon! – if I was going to make it to the end of my gap year. I managed to land a position at Morgan Grenfell as a junior analyst and within three months I knew it was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. A month's job became 12 years: by the time I left I was managing two of the company's largest accounts.

¹ In Japan, reikin is a mandatory payment to the landlord that's often the same amount as the original deposit. Unlike the deposit, however, this money is considered a gift to the landlord and is not returned at the end of the lease. Typically, tenants can pay the equivalent of six months' rent upfront before even moving into an apartment.

* Investment Managers are appointed by BNY Mellon Investment Management EMEA Limited (BNYMIM EMEA) or affiliated fund operating companies to undertake portfolio management activities in relation to contracts for products and services entered into by clients with BNYMIM EMEA or the BNY Mellon funds.

What was your big breakthrough?

My big break was taking on a mandate for a large pension fund in the UK. The account had changed hands several times and performance wasn't what you'd want it to be. It's not that no one wanted anything to do with it but it certainly wasn't seen as the hot ticket for career progression. But at that stage that was fine by me. When you think about it: if something's struggling that presents a real opportunity for improvement.

And that's exactly what happened. I put in place some changes and performance got better. The business recognized I could run money and by 1990 I was managing some of the company's bigger clients. From there I moved to Merrill Lynch, Chase Trust, ING and then ultimately BNY Mellon, taking on more responsibilities as my career developed.

As a senior female fund manager you're something of a rarity in Japan. Why aren't there more women working in fund management?

It's a good question. In theory, managing money should be very clear-cut. Once you start delivering the numbers, gender should stop being important. And to an extent that's true – but the fact remains: when I look around me I see very few female fund managers coming through the ranks.

While I desperately want to see more women coming through, when I receive résumés the ratio's generally nine-to-one in favor of male candidates. And yet, when you look at graduate hiring in Japan outside of fund management the numbers actually favor women these days. For some reason it's just not

happening in this industry, especially when it comes to more experienced hires. I don't really understand why: it might be a chicken and egg thing: that more women just need that first big break.

Have you ever faced any particular roadblocks as a female fund manager?

Not especially. A bigger issue for me when I first managed a team was how much younger I was than some of my direct reports. In such a hierarchical working environment that could have ended disastrously but for whatever reason my team members have always got used to the idea of me being their boss pretty quickly.

Actually, for me, a bigger challenge was motherhood. When I first took on my first senior role with Morgan Grenfell and we had our first daughter we moved into an apartment whose main virtue was its proximity to the office – which meant I could be there at short notice if there were any emergencies with childcare.

Subsequently, wherever I've worked I've lobbied extremely hard for the provision of company facilities for childcare. It's probably one of the single most difficult things for any working woman who has kids: juggling the responsibilities of being a mum with a high-pressure working environment.

We hear a lot about policy initiatives bringing more women into the workforce in Japan but how much of that has translated into actual progress? Is society really changing?

One of the stereotypes about Japanese society is how deeply ingrained its

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conservatism is. That's partly true – but what's also clear is just how rapidly society can change once there's consensus on the direction of travel. That was the case when Japan modernized under the Meiji Emperor in the late 19th century and again at the end of the Second World War during the US occupation. In both cases the country was transformed out of all recognition in an incredibly short time.

We have a comparable situation today in that everyone knows how pressing the need is to make up for our rapidly aging population and low birth rate. Absent a massive increase in immigration, more women in the workforce has to be a big part of that.

One positive change came in 2016 when the government introduced a law requiring all companies with more than 300 employees to adopt gender diversity targets² – but a more important development came in June 2018 with a reform setting a legal cap on overtime. It means companies can no longer literally work their employees to death – *karoshii* in colloquial Japanese – but it also means they'll have to hire more people. Since we're almost at full employment anyway that's a significant step up for women returning to the workforce or for women looking for their first big break.

Of course, you could argue law reforms and government recognition of a problem don't equate to actual change – but what's surprising is how much more relaxed the younger generations is. Things that might have been considered almost taboo in the past have become normal. Take the stereotype of over-worked salaryman and stay-at-home wife. Today, well over 75% of women between the ages of 25-39 now have a job: that's an immense change and it certainly wasn't the case when I started my career.

How does the Womenomics³ strategy engage with the question of gender in Japanese society?

Our investment process is actually quite involved. When we shortlist a company we take a view on whether or not management is genuinely committed to opening doors for women. There are always choices: It could be the rate of change within the organization or it could be companies that are already there in terms of gender diversity.

A well-known example of the latter would be retailer Muji. Well over a third of its managers are women – an important consideration given the usual dearth of women in senior positions. Outside of the mainstream, though, there are other

stories we think are worthwhile. One good example is the Japanese construction industry. There are some very conservative companies in there, for instance, that a generation ago wouldn't have dreamed of employing women but which now value the contribution women can make in what has traditionally been an almost exclusively male industry. It takes time, but attitudes are changing.

How does womenomics' emphasis on gender diversity come through in your team?

I'd say we're pretty exceptional in the industry in Japan in terms of gender. We have a trading team that's a 50/50 split by gender and in the investment team we're lucky to have my colleague Makiko Togari with 20 years' industry experience. Clearly, it makes sense to have diversity of opinion and background in any industry but that's particularly so in asset management: in my experience it's one of the best ways to bring a fresh perspective and new investment ideas to the table.

How do you relax outside of work?

I try to take time out to improve my golf (I currently have a handicap of infinity). I also enjoy spending time with my husband, our two daughters and with our miniature poodle, Chase.

² The Act on Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the Workplace.

³ The Womenomics strategy was launched in 2014, one of the criteria for asset allocation is that the fund manager can only invest in companies committed to or likely to benefit from increased female participation in the workforce.

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