

Hiring, firing by the book in nicest possible way

By ANGELA JEFFS

Tom Nevins, a leading expert on Japanese rules of employment and personnel policy and practices, must have the busiest "meishi" in business. Not only does it open up, offering four sides of information, but contains a discount card for the many books he has written. A name card within a name card, so to speak.

He also has a tough carrier bag at the ready in his office in Hanzomon, Tokyo. This too is a promotional tool, one side screaming the title of his latest tome. "We publish our own titles here at TMT," he explains, "so I have to use every available avenue (and flat surface) to get the word out."

TMT (Technics in Management Transfer Inc.) is the name of the company he founded in 1978. It concentrates on four areas of activity: personnel policy consulting, executive search, seminars and training, and what is politely called "outplacement." Set aside corporate-speak and you are dealing with staff reductions in companies facing economic stagnancy or collapse, the unpleasant task of telling people they are "redundant," no longer required.

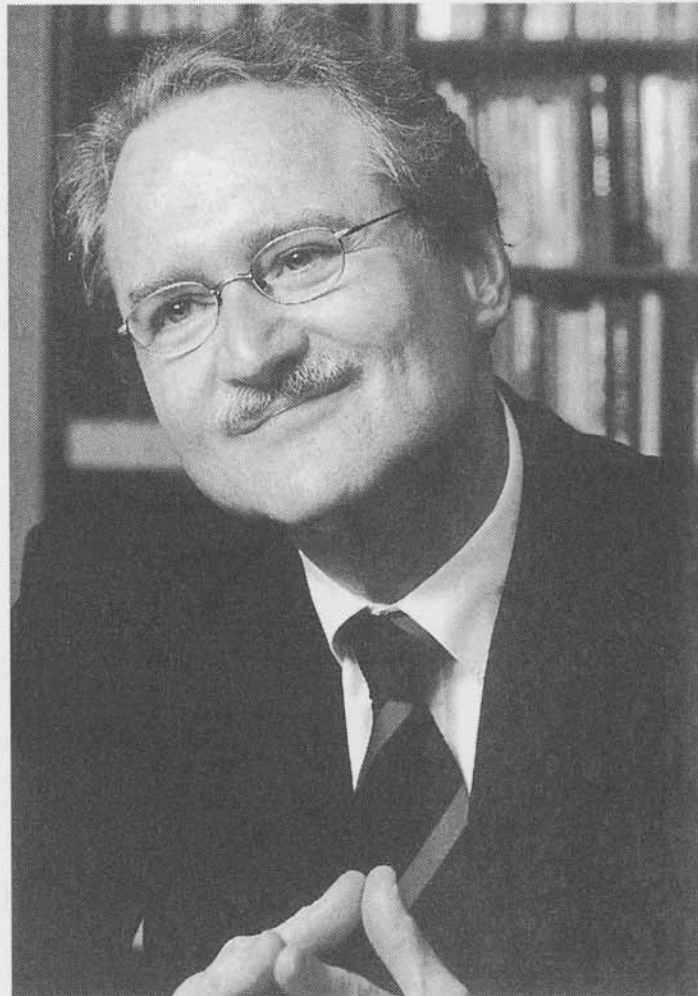
Japan knows all about restructuring and "downsizing" (renamed "rightsizing" in the States). We also know the human cost: families divided, lives wrecked, even suicide. Which is where TMT has honed techniques and resources to come to the rescue. "We've developed a strategic and morale boosting approach to downsizing. When a

company calls us in to help, we begin with the premise that there are other ways to restructure and revitalize an organization."

Such ways include, he rattles off, taking a good hard look at products, service, customer retention, strategy, competition, organization of the work, innovations and technologies applied, hiring, marketing, corporate culture, training, and management communication styles and skills. "We offer good training programs and implementation ideas in many of these areas. But, yes, ultimately there is the reality of staff reduction" — firing.

Tom has made a successful international career out of labor relations. A graduate of Cornell University, he took a year out in the late 1960s to go around the world, ending up here for 10 weeks. "I was 22, with an introduction from my professor at CU to Japan's trade union movement." In those days, introductions tended to snowball, and he was able to make contact with leaders of opposition political parties. Back at Cornell he added Japanese language acquisition to labor relations studies, then headed back to Tokyo and picked up contacts where left off.

"My grandfather was in the print union," Tom says. "Both my parents had master's degrees, and were lifelong supporters of the labor movement. My brother is a lawyer and a Democrat, our older sister Republican. I play the chameleon, neither black nor white, siding with no one but listening, trying to understand where everyone is com-



TOM NEVINS pioneered labor consulting for multinational firms in Japan, and his firm TMT is the only company that also offers recruitment services. ANGELA JEFFS PHOTO

ing from. Perfect for Japan, right?"

It was Gen. Douglas MacArthur who made the pronouncement in 1946: Let there be unions. Outlawed before World War II as being communist-inspired, he insisted they be good unions, meaning employees should not be forced to huddle secretly

employee leaves the union, they can be fired. In small companies this is very radical. It has locked down workplaces, driven customers away. In large companies, unionism is cultivated."

Initially Tom worked as a researcher for Cornell. Living in Minami Asagaya in a six-mat room for a monthly rent of ¥19,500, he hung out in the local bathroom and police box. "Passersby first assumed I was in trouble, then that I was in trouble a lot!" Now he occupies a custom-designed house built in marble on a 90-tsubo site near his office. "When I began my career, the market was less cluttered, there were fewer players. More a matter of timing than luck."

It also helped that he spoke fluent Japanese at a time when few foreigners made the effort. "I was the first non-Japanese to be invited by MITI to join an investment mission to the U.S. in 1979. JETRO got to know me, used me to promote their activities. Also I began writing employment manuals."

His first book (published by JETRO) was "The Complete Handbook of U.S. Personnel and Labor Relations for Japanese Corporations" ("Tabei Shinshutsu Kigyō no Romu Kanri no Subete"). This was followed by several titles published by The Japan Times (now available only from TMT): "Labor Pains and the Gaijin Boss" and "Taking Charge in Japan," for example. This year, under his own TMT imprint, Tom published "Japan True or False: People Problems, Costs, Restructuring" ("for business, union,

government, academic and media opinion leaders").

Tom's most recent title is "Know Your Own Bone: Help Where We Can." And just to set the record straight, follows on: "This book is not about Japan, labor consulting or executive search." Instead, it reveals Tom's attitudes and beliefs on just about everything.

In 1987, with TMT's executive search side of the business in good health, Tom developed a training program and later (1993 by the time it reached the printer) an associated guide: "16 Steps to Corporate Leadership and Excellence: With Insights from 45 Great Thinkers and Achievers."

He is not working on another book. Right now, he says, he has nothing to say. "With my two sons grown and doing OK, I'm in transition, beginning a new phase in my personal life. I can't imagine ever not working — for example I have two large seminars this month, both concerned with helping companies restructure and let staff go with the best possible redundancy packages and assisted support in moving on."

Not a pleasant task. But one that Tom and his staff have refined to an art worthy of corporate, union and public scrutiny. TMT's brochure "Why U.S. Style Downsizing/Outplacement is the Wrong Strategy in Japan" explains just how.

TMT Inc., phone (03) 3261-6471; fax 3221-0601, Web site www.tmt-aba.com

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