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BUSINESS

Profile: Tom Nevins

The beating heart behind TMT, Inc. By Linda Ozawa



Photography by Nick Iwanaga

Tom Nevins, founder and CEO of TMT, Inc., embodies the diverse qualities it takes to survive as a foreign business leader in Japan. Carefully articulate and organized, Nevins has also made serious life decisions based on the recommendations of a palm reader (the palm reading wasn't for him,

it was for a close friend). These seemingly polar qualities of instinct-led spirituality and rationality may be what have kept Nevins successful in the sometimes hard-to-crack business world of Japan.

A healthy dose of modesty can't hurt either. "I actually think I'm a scatterbrain," he said at one point. Not many "scatterbrains" head successful human resource companies or publish a series of successful books, feats Nevins has accomplished during his 34 years in Japan. He initially came to Japan as an undergraduate to research Japanese labor and management relations. He combined his expertise in Japanese Labor Unions and his language and business know-how to launch TMT, an executive search and human resource consulting company.

During a relaxed interview in his office near Hanzomon, he shared some stories, business secrets, and life lessons learned.

I thought you'd have a moustache.

Actually, that's kind of an interesting story. Before I first left for Japan as a researcher, Professor Alice H. Cooke (of Cornell University, Nevins' *alma mater*) looked at me and said "Tom, you're going to Japan, you have to do something about your face." Because I looked very young, I think she thought professionals wouldn't take me seriously, and a moustache matures the face. But I took it off last September. Honestly, the reason was that it was whiter than the rest of my hair and it was starting to depress me.

If there's one business secret you've learned along the way, what is it?

Communication, communication, communication, and ask, ask, ask. If Japan-based foreign companies don't get sufficient support from their home office, they can be left on their own, hung out to dry.

Another thing I've learned is to assume nothing. I think it's very important to get inside a company and really feel what's going on. We often have to implement difficult changes in a company, which involve a break from tradition in the Human Resource area. Of course it affects people's lives and pocketbooks, so it cannot be done cavalierly.

Could you give me an example?

I can't divulge any client information, so without getting into details, a client may want us to reduce overtime rates or the employees that can be paid overtime. These are difficult decisions. It's true that the majority of Japanese companies have reduced their retirement policies.

I've read that you are a very devoted reader and studier. For example, before writing the book *Know Your Own Bone*, you avidly studied self-help books. What interests you now?

Well, if people really want to know, right now I'm working out a lot!

I think that's another business secret. Take care of your health and have a balanced life. I have studied very hard though. It took lots of work to get my Japanese ability to the point where I could give talks in Japanese, which I do. I've probably studied for thousands of hours, maybe more than I needed to. But I think that effort shows in the work we do at TMT.

Can I ask you about the book *Know Your Own Bone*? It's very different from your other work on labor and business in Japan. It's more of a self-help book.

It's based on a series of seminars I developed starting from 1987. Each seminar was based on a famous quote. I think it's a book that can help people, and it's really to pay homage and respect to the universe off accumulated intellect.

I was a little scared that this book might give people the wrong idea. They might assume that a person who writes this type of touchy-feely stuff can't be serious and reliable. But I think it's a cool book. To be honest though, one of the only reasons I wrote it was to financially help an old friend that had lost his job. I asked him to translate it, and I was able to give him some work and help him out a little bit.

I think you're being modest again.

No, it's the truth! But I'm not that concerned. If people can get a kick out of it, I'm happy.