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The Importance of Flexibility Learning to Live Successfully in Japan

By Graham Van Zwoll, Recruitment Division Manager

I know this isn't exactly rocket science. I'm not a rocket scientist after all. But, it seems to me that the key to living in a faraway land, and doing so happily and contently and successfully - is flexibility.

This isn't new. It isn't something you've never thought about. This isn't something that is extremely challenging or impossible to do. It's just something that from the moment you arrive you have to take to heart in order to truly enjoy and appreciate the great experience of living in Japan. You need to look out the window every day and say, "Wow, I'm not in my home country anymore." This is not your home country. This is a country that has been around much longer than most of our home countries. This is a country which has its own unique way of doing things (as all countries do of course) that is very different than the way many of us are used to doing things. Things just aren't done the same way here and often noone, not even the Japanese themselves, can tell you why. It's just different. That's the way it is. Accept it. In order to appreciate your time in Japan and make the absolute most of it, you've got to learn to be flexible.

For example, I don't openly question things. You can ask and try to learn the differences, but I don't encourage you to question why the system is the way it is when you come across something you don't like. Too often these questions can imply that you think there is a better system, i.e. in your home country. The Japanese typically don't openly question or challenge things. So, if you are going to live here, blend

in, and learn as best you can, then do as the Japanese do. Observe things, but don't necessarily question them. Compare, but only to make interesting observations and to learn. How would you feel if a foreigner came to your country and asked prying questions and had sharp comments on how things work in your country? How would your family feel? Your friends? Even without intention, these kinds of comments tend not to be taken well. Be very aware of what you are saying and accept how things are done.

If your offer of a perfectly good activity is turned down by the Japanese teacher because he wants to do some much less exciting exercise, simply agree. "OK, that's fine. How can I help with that exercise?" is all you need to say. Don't push once more to try to convince him your idea is better. Don't. Be flexible, agree, and move on. If you imply that your activity is better than his, how would that make him feel?

When your school lunch bowl of rice arrives and it's rather less than steaming hot, well, that's just the way it is. Everyone is in the same boat. Could they dish it out later and deliver it to you hotter? Maybe. But that's not for you and me to question. It's just how they do it. How would you feel if someone tried to tell you they didn't like the way you'd been doing something for as long as you can remember?

And why would you mix in all those tiny, little white fish into a perfectly good bowl of rice? I hate those little fish and they're mixed right into my rice! How

can I take them all out and eat only the rice. The answer is you don't. And you won't. Just look away and eat as best you can. And don't mention it to the lady who spent the whole morning making it because that won't help anything. How would you feel if someone told you they didn't appreciate all your hard work?

When that noisy student who rarely participates starts acting up again and the Japanese teacher doesn't seem to do anything, neither should you. You may not understand why she deals with it that way but she does. Support her and work with her. If she ignores it, then you should too. If she stops class then you can stop and wait patiently too. How would you feel if a foreigner didn't agree with the way you handled a difficult situation in your home country?

How about the way people work till 7 or 8 or 9 in the evening every day? Or how they all pay an equal amount regardless of how much they ate or drank at the dinner? Or the way teachers dress? What about the methods they use to teach English? The focus on grammar, spelling and stroke order of the ABCs? How about the schedule changes? Or asking everyone to come to school during a typhoon even when the kids aren't there? These are all just opportunities to be flexible. Adapt, be considerate of others, do things the way they do. The more you accept the uniqueness of Japan and how things are done here the more enjoyable your experience will be. You'll be happier, more content and more successful. It just takes a little flexibility.

“Bottom line - I will only offer a job to someone who I would want to teach my own children.”

-Graham Van Zwoll
Recruiting Division Manager,
ALTIA CENTRAL



ALTIA CENTRAL Recruiting The Overall Process...

Recruiting the best and most flexible people for a company the size of ALTIA CENTRAL (currently about 300 ALTs) is a full time job and keeps us busy throughout the entire year. As a general rule of thumb, we hire about 75% or more of our ALTs in-country, and we interview hundreds more applicants than we hire. We tend to get a lot of applications through word of mouth and recommendations from our current and former ALTs, various job search websites like Gaijinpot.com and JobsInJapan.com, our friends at Genki English, positive online reviews and ratings, as well as overseas-based professors who recommend their graduates to us.

Our 2 key hiring periods are the months leading up to the beginning of April and September, the starting months of the 1st and 2nd semesters in the Japanese school system. The key times to apply are in January, February and March for April starting positions or later on from mid May, June and July for September positions. For overseas applicants though, the big interviewing seasons start in October and May as we need to get a head start on visa applications etc.

On average, we need to hire about 70 to 80 or more new ALTs each April, and another 25 or 30 in September. We accept applications

throughout most periods of the year, but these are the most concentrated periods. If we are in a busy period and you are applying for a later position, we may ask you to get back with us once the current recruit season is over.

The academic year runs from the beginning of April to the end of March in Japan and all of our ALT contracts formally end at that time, regardless of when the ALT started, so March is obviously a big turnover period. Unfortunately, there are also a few ALTs who must leave in the middle of any given semester for one personal reason or another, so recruiting for these sudden openings never really ends. The process after we receive an application is something like this:

- review resumes and screen suitable applicants,
- set up and conduct face to face interviews,
- collect documentation & do reference checks,
- communicate back and forth about various possibilities and preferences,
- make final placements and official offers

We try as best we can to communicate back and forth with each applicant, getting your preferences, answering questions and giving updates to keep you informed each step of the way. So when we finally do make an official offer, you will feel comfortable enough to accept.



**Accept and
Screen
Applications**

**Hold Interviews
& Check
References**

**Locate a
Suitable
Position**

**Make an
Official
Offer**

Living in *Inaka*

Reflections from the Countryside

By Abbey HOWELL, former ALTIA CENTRAL ALT in Gifu Prefecture

I was an ALT in Ena, Gifu Prefecture and I couldn't have been happier with my placement. Ena is a small city surrounded by gorgeous mountains, which makes for spectacular drives to and from work each day. After having been a HS teacher in New Jersey, USA, for a few years I was looking forward to being able to be with kids in a teaching capacity, but without all the discipline, paperwork, dealing with parents, assignments, etc. Just all kids, all the time. As an ALT I got to do just that.

I was teaching at 3 junior high and 3 elementary schools, with most of my days being at JHS. One of my schools was "urban" (as urban as you can get here) and the other two are very small mountain schools of 59 and 18 students total! I certainly get more requests for participation and contribution to lesson planning at my smaller schools and feel more at home there among the faculty.

My main school has been wonderful in including me in all "after school" events – even trips to an *onsen* and skiing in the winter months! At the larger school (400 plus students) I'm more like what you may have heard referred to as a "human tape recorder," but I try to contribute as much as possible while in the classroom, I'm always moving around the class, checking students' work, making small talk (when the teacher isn't talking of course!) and just trying to interact with the kids as much as possible. That's part of our job as ALTs – to provide a positive foreigner/English-experience to Japanese youth. So even if I can't teach them directly, I can possibly influence them to like English and be comfortable with foreigners.

At my two main elementary schools I'm totally responsible for all preparations for the lesson. Most of my teachers don't speak English, but I've been lucky in that they all at least stick around and try to help to the best of their ability. Elementary school is hard work, and at the end of the day I'm exhausted, but the kids are so excited about learning, playing and being with you that it's very rewarding.

Living in Ena has been wonderful. It's a small city, an hour train ride from Nagoya, but I have found it to be very easy to get along here. Although I'd studied Japanese Language on my own before coming, my Japanese was very limited when I got here. However, people have been very patient with me, helping me do whatever it is I need to get done – changing the oil in my car, sending money home, buying gas and kerosene, etc. The resident JETs and other ALTIA CENTRAL ALTs in the area have made for great resources and support as well. On that note, I think you'll find your experience here very rewarding, especially with ALTIA CENTRAL. They take great measures to make sure each ALT is happy and taken care of. This job is a wonderful way to be with kids, share cultures and experience Japan!



"That's part of our job as ALTs – to provide a positive foreigner/English-experience to Japanese youth."

SPOTLIGHT

Masaki HIBINO & Michael SULLIVAN

Some say that Japan + public school + foreigners = potential problems! How can it not? It's a totally different school system in general of course, and each school and teacher is uniquely different as well, so local knowledge is vital.

That's why it's important to have our talented and dedicated staff to guide and support you as you work as an ALT in your local public school system. ALTIA CENTRAL has a 2-person team in each area we operate in to take care

of you and help make your experience even better. One of these teams is Supervisor Michael SULLIVAN and IUP Coordinator Masaki HIBINO.

Michael has lived in Hamamatsu, Shizuoka for more than 15 years and thus his intimate local knowledge of the Shizuoka and eastern Aichi areas where he works is beyond compare.

He has worked closely with Masaki for the last 2 years or so, most notably in one of our biggest contracts in Toyota City. Masaki learned English (and French too) while living in Montreal, Canada a few years back and is always eager to meet in greet ALTs in his areas in

either language. He often tags along with Michael during a class visit and then the 2 of them will stop by the local BOE to let them know how our ALTs are doing.

