

The Japan Times **OPINION**

EDITORIALS

Honda makes English official

[ARTICLE HISTORY](#) | JUL 18, 2015

Honda Motor Co. has decided to switch its official corporate language for international communications within the company to English by 2020, the company announced publicly in its annual sustainability report.

The automaker had worked to make English an important part of its operations over the past several years, but its decision to make English the corporate lingua franca recognizes the future of Honda's operations as more fully international in scope and character. By 2020, senior executives will have to prove their English fluency before taking up their positions, and internal documents that need to be in English will be written that way rather than translated from Japanese.

The new English policy is more than just a practical measure; it is a sensible response to business realities. That comes none too late, since an increasingly large portion of Honda's global sales are in the largest English-speaking country in the world, the United States. Honda became in 1982 the first Japanese automaker to start manufacturing cars in the U.S. and remains the fifth-largest automaker in America. Though sales are down slightly from their peak of 2007, North America still accounted for 47 percent of Honda's revenue in fiscal 2013.

Honda clearly wants and needs to establish an international workforce that better matches the reality of the company's global presence. Last year, Honda hired 4,778 new workers in North America, but only 719 in Japan. Japanese employees account for just 32 percent of Honda's total global work force of 204,730, and that share has been shrinking. Honda may be a Japanese firm in origin, but it is increasingly international in character.

The move to English follows the lead of Japanese companies such as Fast Retailing (Uniqlo), Rakuten and Bridgestone, which all have English-only policies. But it also follows the lead of other large international companies from other countries. Chinese tech giant Lenovo made English its lingua franca many years ago, and the same goes for Nokia, Audi, Airbus, Aventis, Daimler-Chrysler, Renault and Samsung, among others.

Honda rival Nissan Motor Co. has already taken steps to internationalize, but in different ways. Roughly 40 percent of Nissan's corporate officers are non-Japanese, in addition to being in a partnership with the French company Renault. At Honda, though, only one of 36 senior

executives is non-Japanese, though in North America, 59 percent of senior management at regional offices are hired locally. The company's character, in short, has changed considerably over the years.

In addition to personnel shifts, the fast pace of global business nowadays no longer allows time for decisions to be discussed in Japanese, translated into English and distributed to non-Japanese employees. Quick decisions, prompt responses and real-time communications are the keys to remaining competitive. All of this, many companies are deciding, is easier when it's all done in English.

The question remains, though, whether the Japanese education system will adapt to these forces driving business toward greater use of English. Unfortunately, resistance to more thorough English education may come from some teachers, school administrators and education ministry officials who feel it is not their job to train students for future jobs. However, the move toward English as an official language in companies does at least offer an answer to the question many students, parents and teachers still ask: "Why is English important?"

A contingent of the English education system in Japan still focuses on passing college entrance exams, not on acquiring competence in English. Exams should not be ignored, but neither should they drive the curriculum. Universities need to change the English section in their entrance exams to better accommodate the reality of English as a necessary skill in international workplaces. Those changes are under way in many places but are far from complete.

What is lacking in large part is an engaging English environment that develops a positive attitude in students' early studies toward learning the language. Positive reinforcement — not just passing a university entrance exam — is needed at every level of English study in Japan. Good study habits for learning English need to be encouraged so that young students grasp the idea that they can, and must, keep learning English over a period of years.

Today's young students can start that process from the beginning of their English study but need to continue it over time. A workforce willing to continue to engage with English is a workforce willing to engage in other challenges with a forward-thinking, flexible attitude. Global business requires not just English skill but an attitude of openness to understanding the world, by interacting with people, practices and ideas from other countries. Learning a second language can help foster such an attitude.

The Japanese education system needs to recognize that companies are increasingly settling on English as their official language. It is not easy to find appropriate ways to develop confidence, positive mindsets and strong study skills in students, but it is one of the challenges of the current English system.

Honda, like the many other firms that have started using the international language of English, are sending a message that they know how to do business outside their own language context and are willing to expand the potential of Japan's global business environment with new models and fresh thinking. Schools, and those still in doubt, should listen to that message.

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