

JQ Magazine: JQ&A with Bridges to Japan

Founder Jennifer Jakubowski

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By Lana Kitcher (Yamanashi-ken, 2010-12) for JQ Magazine. Lana is a New York native, and just recently returned to the U.S. She wrote for the AJET online magazine Connect while on the JET Program. She also enjoys writing about her adventures on her blog at Kitcher's Café.

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Jennifer Jakubowski (Hokkaido, 1995-97) is the Founder and Managing Director of *Bridges to Japan*, a Japanese-American cross-cultural consulting and training firm based in New York. Prior to joining JET, Jakubowski spent two of her younger years in Japan, one as a junior high school student due to her father's job and one as an exchange student at Waseda University.

Following her time on JET, she worked for the Nagano Winter Olympics as a broadcaster (despite having no experience or training, she wryly recalls), acquired a master's degree in international studies and diplomacy in London, and then returned to the U.S. to chart a professional course in cross-cultural consulting in New York City. This mixture of experiences and opportunities over the years has landed her where she is today with Bridges to Japan.



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As an inspiration to past, current and future JETs, **JQ** caught up with Jakubowski to learn about how she made it to where she is now, and what advice she has to offer to other JETs and alumni hoping to use their JET experience in their future careers.

Tell us a little about what you do at Bridges to Japan.

Most simply put, our mission is to help bridge cultural differences between Japanese and American business communities. As anyone who has spent time in both cultures can attest to, there are significant differences in how things are approached on many levels and these differences, if not addressed, can lead to misunderstandings. In the business world especially, this can have an adverse impact on the bottom line of a business initiative. Our end goal is for each side to better understand where the other side is coming from so that the relationship is more successful and enjoyable all around.

How do you achieve this?

For American clients, this most often involves training them on Japanese business and social norms unfamiliar to them if they haven't had prior experience dealing with the Japanese culture. On the flip side, we work with Japanese expatriates in the U.S. (or on their way) to help them adapt to American workplace norms and to navigate working with locally hired American staff.

What kind of people or companies might be interested in your services at Bridges to Japan?

Any American organizations or individuals who are doing business with Japan, but who are unfamiliar with how to effectively navigate the cultural waters. It's truly amazing the impact that even one day of training can have on the success of a particular business relationship. I hear it time and again from my clients. As you know, the Japanese don't expect you to "be" Japanese—they even find it a little weird or unsettling when gaijin try *too* hard—but the effort to reach across the aisle and demonstrate some cultural compromise and sensitivity in the course of business can make or break a relationship. Likewise, Japanese expatriates working in the U.S.—or on their way to the U.S.—are ideal candidates for the type of support we provide.

How did your experience on the JET Program prepare you for, and lead you to where you are now?

In addition to certain aspects of business that I've learned through experience over the years, having a solid understanding of the Japanese culture is the single most important aspect of my work. By being exposed to so many situations and Japanese people on JET—speaking to senior citizen groups, teaching junior high school students, working with Japanese government officials, playing softball with local peers, volunteering at a special education program, riding tractors with local farmers...you name it—my cultural literacy escalated significantly. While the learning curve is infinite, I feel that the JET experience endowed me with significant knowledge on this front by mere virtue of what was expected of me in that capacity. I had a strong academic base and some prior experience in Japan going into the program, which certainly helped, but the range of things I experienced on the JET Program was really astounding. Once I had a solid understanding of these cultural differences and the value of applying this knowledge professionally, I've been hooked on applying it professionally ever since.

Many of those who have just finished their JET contract, like myself, may have recently started searching for “what’s next.” Do you have any advice for these individuals during their transition?

Honestly? The greatest piece of advice I can give—and I said this in the Conference for Returning JETs this spring—is to take a deep breath and trust that you will sort things out. Work hard and give your future due attention, yes. But don't be too hard on yourselves. It's not going to happen overnight for the vast majority of you. And that's okay. The truth is, statistically speaking, most of you will have two or three different careers—careers, not jobs—in your professional lifespan, so don't get too swept up with trying to figure out the rest of your lives. No matter how much you plan, it's likely to switch courses and surprise you anyway. Take that from a veteran (*laughs*).

Two more things I would throw out there as food for thought on this front. First, don't underestimate the impact of reverse culture shock. Not to scare anyone, but it is a very real psychological phenomenon—manageable, but real. And if you don't take proper steps to counter it, you're going to struggle to get your emotional footing and your other efforts will likely be in vain. In other words, if you don't make it a point to take care of yourself mentally, you are not going to be productive elsewhere in your life. Second, I can't emphasize the value of networking enough. Arm yourself with some general business cards and get out and meet people as often as you can. You never know who will end up pointing you in a useful direction. If you are interested in doing something Japan-related, the JET alumni community is definitely a good start. And, in that case, you get two birds with one stone: combating reverse culture shock by associating with people who can relate to your experiences in Japan, and getting to know people who might be useful contacts for you on the career front.

How did you make the most out of your two years on the JET Program?

First and foremost, I took very seriously the investment in Japanese people whose paths I crossed...easy and light relationships as well as the more challenging ones. Just as some people approach museums as learning experiences, I approach people that way...especially in a foreign culture. There are so many Japanese “things” that I enjoy and appreciate, but the soul of any culture, in my opinion, lies in the people. I made a deliberate effort to approach my relationships there, collectively, as the lenses through which I learned about the culture. Most of what I do today professionally is a tribute to that investment.

Also, and it might sound simple, but I threw caution to the wind with regard to taking risks. That is to say, I didn't worry about looking like a fool being the fish out of water. I can't recall many invitations I turned down or opportunities I didn't jump on. I tried to look at every experience as a contribution to my life toolbox. I had spent a year living with a Japanese family as a university student and was more on the cautious side with using my Japanese, trying new things, etc. and I realized in retrospect that that approach hindered the breadth and depth of my cultural experience, even if I did have significantly fewer incidents of making a fool of myself that way (*laughs*)...and so I decided to switch gears as a JET. Plus, it's just a lot more fun to go for it. This is something I've carried with me in my professional life beyond JET as well. I have a favorite Zen proverb that puts it nicely: “Those who dance are fools. Those who watch are fools. Might as well dance.”

What are the most difficult and rewarding things about your job?

Wow, there are so many rewarding things it's hard to know where to start. I think I'd have to say that most of the things I enjoy point to the satisfaction of helping people from two cultures I feel deep affection for. It's really cool to be able to apply a body of knowledge that was hard earned—and, in my case, a long time in the making—and feel that I've made a significant impact.

The most difficult thing? While there are some progressive companies who are clear about the value of cross-cultural consulting, it is still not the standard product or service that, say, accounting or sales is. As such, it takes a more sophisticated and persistent

approach to get prospective clients fully on board as to the value of what many might see as a “soft” consulting service. Once they’re on board, they are usually shocked that it took them as long as it did to invest in this infrastructure, but it’s still a bit more work on the front end. I see this changing in the coming years, though, as global businesses are placing more and more emphasis on cultural literacy.

Where do you hope to take Bridges to Japan from here?

So far, Bridges to Japan has provided services as a network of consultants and business partners working together, for the most part, remotely. While this has been very effective as a business model so far, I think there’s a lot to be said for people working towards a common goal having a workspace they can share. I’d really like to see us set up an office at some point with a more solid physical presence as a team.

Any final things you’d like to share with us?

I’d like to wish all returning JETs well with the transition home and remind you to revel in what you have experienced and accomplished, alongside being naturally concerned about what the future holds next. For JETs just embarking upon your time in Japan, take in every minute of it and remember to see even the challenges as fodder for one of the most amazing learning experiences you will have in your lifetime!

Visit Bridges to Japan online at www.bridgestojapan.com.