

30% CLUB JAPAN INVESTOR GROUP INTERVIEW SERIES VOL9

Interview with Yoko Oshima: Promoting Diversity Means Respecting Human Rights — Helping Everyone Succeed in Their Own Way

**GSAM** You started your career as an attorney, and later concurrently served as General Counsel at GE Japan Inc. and GE Digital Asia, before taking your current position as Assistant General Counsel and Head of Corporate, External and Legal Affairs (CELA) at Microsoft. Tell us about your career path so far, including your background to becoming an in-house lawyer.

**Oshima** When I was in college, I felt that pursuing a profession that requires specific expertise might make it easier for me to go back to work even if I were to pause my career, so I aimed to become a lawyer. After getting qualified, I worked at a law firm in Tokyo handling cross-border

**“AS A PERSON IN LEGAL PROFESSION, I BELIEVE THAT D&I INITIATIVES SHOULD BE ADDRESSED AS HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES”**

transactions, studied at a law school in the United States, and then worked at a law firm in New York while maintaining my position at the law firm in Tokyo. Ultimately, I moved to the law firm in New York and built my career and experience there. One day, when I was working on a project related to Japan, I realized that my memory of Japanese legal terms was fading, so I started thinking about returning to Japan. I also decided then to pursue an in-house lawyer career to attain a work-life balance, so I joined a Japan subsidiary of GE where I stayed for 14 years. Following this, I moved to Microsoft—a company that provides AI and cloud solutions—about three and a half years ago, and I lead the department for Corporate, External, and Legal Affairs in Japan. At GE, I was involved in finance, energy, and digital businesses, which provide the infrastructure of society. Through this work, I felt that digital infrastructure would become more important going forward, and my interests grew

toward a company that was centered around digital business.

**GSAM** The fields of digital and IT are said to have relatively few women. Did you face any difficulties or enjoy any benefits as a woman in your career so far?

**Oshima** When I was working at a law firm in Tokyo, I was the only woman or one of two women in most meetings. The ratio of men to women is roughly equal among associates at law firms in the United States. However, at least twenty years ago when I worked there, the partners were mostly white men. I did not feel any disadvantages as a

woman in my daily work. However, I spoke with my female colleagues about how to build a good relationship with partners and how to earn interesting work opportunities. For example, there was a project for restructuring Iraq’s sovereign debts from Saddam

Hussein’s era. I talked to a partner whom I wanted to work with and discussed with him my interests and other matters. Two years later, I suddenly got a phone call asking me to get involved in that project.

Looking back, I think that up until my late 30s, I may have subconsciously felt that I didn’t need to set my aims so high because I was a woman. In fact, I had an opportunity for a promotion, but I belittled myself and declined, choosing a more junior job instead. I feel that women tend to think of themselves as not being qualified, ready to become a manager or take a senior role. As a manager, together with more responsibility, you get more discretion and subordinates to delegate, meaning that you can work on a larger scale. I would recommend people who are debating about their career to proactively grab opportunities for promotions. By promoting someone to a manager, the company has the responsibility to help that person



**Yoko Oshima**

Assistant General Counsel  
Head of Corporate, External and Legal Affairs (CELA)  
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After completing the training at The Legal Training and Research Institute in Japan in 1999, Yoko Oshima worked at law firms in Tokyo and New York, and then joined the GE group as an in-house lawyer and developed her career through several roles including Executive Counsel and General Counsel. In May 2021, she joined Microsoft Japan, where she assumed her current position in July of that year. She is qualified in New York and Japan.

succeed. And such kind of support can only be given to someone who steps up and takes the opportunity. It is also important, as a female manager, to communicate the appeal of managerial role. When each and every individual attains peak performance, this directly boosts the company’s results. It is also delightful to see your own team members growing.

**GSAM** Thank you for your advice that can greatly encourage young women. Outside of your work, you currently engage in activities as part of the Lawyers for LGBT & Allies Network (LLAN), and you are striving to promote diversity. Did anything in your job spur you to recognize the importance of boosting diversity awareness?

**Oshima** It was thanks in part to the corporate culture. When I started my career as an in-house lawyer, I started to engage more actively in promoting Diversity & Inclusion (D&I), including efforts related to gender and LGBTQ+. My involvement in LGBTQ+ issues began when I heard that a friend of the global General Counsel at GE Capital then felt anxious about the safety of his gay child who was about to enter college. This coincided with efforts to create an employee LGBTQ+ community at GE, and I explored what I could do to help. I now have the pleasure of being a board member of LLAN. Every time I joined allyship training courses or listened to people from the LGBTQ+ community at my previous workplace and at Microsoft, I always learned something new, including about my own unconscious biases. I feel that it is important to continue learning. According to a survey from ReBit,<sup>1</sup> 48% of LGBTQ+ individuals have had suicidal thoughts, and 14% have attempted suicide. As a person in the legal profession, I strongly believe that D&I is directly linked with human rights. A workplace in which LGBTQ+ people can be themselves and work with psychological safety will be a kinder work environment for anyone, so this can help boost performance.

**GSAM** I understand that Microsoft has a diversity network called the Employee Resource Group. Could you give an overview of the diversity initiatives at Microsoft Japan Co., Ltd., such as its programs that support a diverse range of human resources?

**Oshima** Microsoft's mission is "to empower every person and every organization on the planet to achieve more." In order to succeed at our mission, we must have a workforce that is as diverse and inclusive as our customer base.

**"I TRY TO SPEAK ON THEIR BEHALF ABOUT TOPICS THAT THEY MAY NOT BE ABLE TO SPEAK OUT ON THEIR OWN"**

Whether it is religion, age, gender, sexuality or race, we want to attract employees that reflect the society we live in and who feel comfortable in bringing their authentic selves to work every day. Microsoft has nine diversity networks, including Blacks at Microsoft (BAM) for Black employees, networks for Hispanic employees, former military members, and other demographics. There are four networks in Japan for women, LGBTQ (GLEAM), working parents, and people with disabilities (Barrier Free). I am an executive sponsor of GLEAM.

**GSAM** I would like to ask about the opinions of women in the workplace. What do you think should be done so that women can demonstrate their abilities more fully at the workplace? What kind of role do you think you can play in this regard?

**Oshima** It is crucial to have commitments from executives and as the company, in addition to employees' voluntary groups. At Microsoft Japan, the management team works together to increase the number of women at every job level, including managerial roles. I have not given birth or raised children myself. However, if I see employees who, for example, have issues with meetings conflicting with the times for taking children to and from nursery, or with children's bedtimes,

I try to speak on their behalf about the importance of being considerate of others' situations, or other topics that parents or other employees may not be able to speak out on their own. I may have a similar mindset in my activities as an

**"TO DELIVER TECHNOLOGY THAT CAN CHANGE THE WORLD, IT IS OF UTMOST IMPORTANCE TO BE CONSIDERATE OF ALL KINDS OF PEOPLE AROUND THE GLOBE"**

LGBTQ+ ally.

**GSAM** I hope that Japan comes to have more leaders who serve as allies in promoting diversity like yourself. Moving to a slightly different topic, I'd like to ask you about the connection between your work at Microsoft and efforts in promoting diversity. I understand that you are involved in responsible AI through your current work. As AI is based on past data, I can imagine that there may be cases where biases from real people in history have been unintentionally included within AI. How would you envision an AI that is considerate of diversity?

**Oshima** Thank you for your kind comment and question. The society is undergoing significant change with the arrival of generative AI. To

deliver technology that can change the world, it is of utmost importance to be considerate of all kinds of people around the globe. In line with this, the six key principles for AI at Microsoft include fairness and inclusiveness. It is vital to understand and address the unconscious biases and privileges that

decision-makers have when developing AI products and solutions. For example, if an AI has insufficient data about a specific race, or if face recognition is not accurate enough when dealing with a particular race, and these technologies are used for crime investigations without mitigating measures, such cases may result in violation of human rights. In 2018, the enforcement authorities of the State of California were interested in using Microsoft's facial recognition technology for investigations. However, at that time, we made a decision against providing this technology until appropriate laws were in place. To give a recent example that demonstrates the potential of technology, an AI chatbot

<sup>1</sup><https://prtimes.jp/main/html/rd/p/000000031.000047512.html>

that translates information from English to local dialects in India enabled villagers in India to apply for various government schemes without speaking English or visiting a government office which is a few hours away.

**GSAM** I agree that it is important to consider the users of generative AI. I feel that the nature of work is also beginning to change with the advent of generative AI. What kind of role do you think AI can play in terms of enabling women to demonstrate their abilities more fully at the workplace?

**Oshima** Utilizing generative AI can boost work efficiency regardless of gender. Generative AI lets a huge number of people stand at the same starting line in jobs, without the need for expertise. In this way, I feel that there are more opportunities for people to gain new skills and build their careers. To solve the gender gap in the fields of cloud, AI, and digital technologies, Microsoft started a program on May 7, 2024 called “Code; Without Barriers in Japan (CWBJ).” This program empowers female developers and engineers, as well as other women in IT as they gain new skills. It provides opportunities for training, networking, mentorships, and support to women, particularly those who are in irregular employment (such as temporary agent workers) or who are currently seeking a job.

**GSAM** In closing, I'd like to ask whether you have any advice for

other Japanese companies regarding how to promote diversity. Do you have any suggestions for companies that are struggling to find talented female engineers?

**Oshima** A company's commitment is a must if it wants more female engineers. It is crucial to carry out specific measures so that female employees can achieve success over the medium to long term after joining the company. For example, the company can define medium- to long-term career plans and regularly review these plans, and it can appoint mentors addressing employees' needs. It is also vital to have a compensation and promotion system based on work impacts rather than their cumulative years of service. It is also important to sow seeds for the future through efforts such as communicating the appeal of STEM subjects to girls in middle school and above, as well as providing opportunities for reskilling. “Let Them See What You See”—it is important to have the top management appreciate and recognize the need and importance based on real-world experience and concrete examples.

**GSAM** Goldman Sachs Asset Management engages with the companies that it invests in regarding the topic of diversity in the board of directors and among employees, and so I found your advice highly enlightening. We also feel that it is particularly important for

the top management to have a solid understanding of the importance of promoting diversity. What kinds of systems and structures are ideal for a company to achieve diverse exchanges of opinions among executives while being inclusive of race, gender, and other qualities?

**Oshima** Sharing the same values with respect to the importance of having diverse opinions is vital. It can take time to reach a conclusion if many different viewpoints are presented, but that can ultimately bring the most mature conclusion. To enable people to offer diverse opinions, it is crucial to provide psychological safety, and for everyone to have the transparency and curiosity to accept one another's viewpoints. Companies should provide opportunities for employees to learn that there are people of many different backgrounds, and that society is developing in D&I. In addition, it is important to visualize and evaluate the current progress of D&I initiatives. Microsoft published a report on D&I last November, with details on our progress and challenges. Microsoft Japan still has room for improvement in terms of empowering women and in other areas, so the leadership team in Japan will continue to thrive as one team.

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