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# INTERNATIONAL Newsweek®

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# C O S T

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# Japanese firms ready to build a better future

Japan's labor shortages due to its aging population, the need to refurbish and maintain aging infrastructure, increasing natural disasters, climate change and the shift towards carbon neutrality due to environmental concerns. These are just some of the main challenges facing the construction and related industries in Japan today. And in order to tackle these challenges, companies and stakeholders are turning to DX (digital transformation) and the power of new technologies such as IoT and automation.

"In the past, we were able to secure plenty of workers, so there was no incentive or driving force to introduce additional means. It was more efficient to focus on having multiple workers take care of one construction-related task, rather than focusing on increasing the capability of one worker. But the environment has drastically changed, and it's now important to increase per-capita productivity for instance by utilizing DX and/or AI," says Soichiro Masuoka, President of Masuoka Gumi, a civil engineering and building construction services company that has embraced new technologies such as drones, 3D mapping and AI to enhance its operations.

EARTHTECHNICA, meanwhile – a company that provides crushing and grinding machinery to the construction and other industries – has adopted sensor technology, 3D imaging technology and Big Data to improve monitoring and

evaluation work. "In the past, human operators conducted inspections by eye. But now automation and sensors are used to manage a very stable condition on the field," explains president Masahiko Nishii. "3D imaging is a very high-level technology, so we asked our parent company, Kawasaki Heavy Industries, for design cooperation. Competitors of the same size as us find it very difficult to have such a large R&D capacity. As we are part of the Kawasaki Heavy Industries group, that engineering and technological edge is what we have over our competitors."

Japan's declining population also has spurred the shrinking of the domestic market, forcing many companies to look abroad for business growth. While doing so, Chikami, a company which supplies functional raw materials to the construction and other industries, aims to develop a business model that promotes collaboration with local firms. "Major American, European and Japanese companies have not disclosed any of their technologies to locals, and what tends to happen is that those major companies take the technology and do the work by themselves in order to retain said technology," states president Kunio Chikami. "We need to change the business model to build win-win relationships with local companies."

With companies in five countries, Yabashi Holdings operates in the construction, machinery and mining industries. President Tatsuyoshi

Yabashi also describes his company's approach to overseas business, stressing the importance of synergy and collaboration. "At Yabashi, our core strength is having companies in different countries and industries, all independently working hard to achieve *monozukuri* – perfection and innovation in manufacturing. The variations between the group's global locations trigger a synergic effect. We believe the more we understand each other culturally and business-wise, the larger the synergic effect. That is why we want to present an example of multicultural cohabitation."

Optimization, sustainability and automation will prove key as companies are faced with increasingly limited resources, be it materials or human capital, as pointed out by Noriyuki Ishihara, president of construction-related trading company Ishihara. "First, as an environmentally friendly company, when using gypsum board, it is pre-cut at the factory, so no waste is generated at the construction site. And all gypsum board cut in our factory is 100% recycled. This is one of our strengths," he adds. "Another activity is optimization. Due to the labor shortage these days, it is difficult to secure human resources and to improve work efficiency, so we have to introduce new technologies such as robots. These integrated systems help alleviate the burden on operators, and this is key given the scarcity of human capital in the domestic market."

## Paper material trader Chikami the "connective tissue" for cross-industry collaboration

Since its foundation in 1946, Chikami Miltec has continued to be an integrated provider of functional raw materials, supporting key industries such as paper and non-woven fabric manufacturing, machinery and construction and civil engineering.

With a huge selection of products ranging from raw materials and functional products to industrial materials needed for civil engineering, Chikami Miltec has been an established industry player for more than three quarters of a century.

Due to Japan's well-documented demographic issues, the company has set its sights on global expansion. "In Japan, production and consumption are shrinking due to population decline, but if you look at the whole world, the population is increasing," says president Kunio Chikami. "Therefore, we must take a global view when it comes

to the pursuit of further business growth. We are trying to look at the market from a bird's eye perspective rather than a narrow-sighted one."

The company already enjoys a certain international status with their Geodrain product, a prefabricated vertical drain (PVD), which is used in civil engineering for soft ground improvement, and has become standard in Japan, Vietnam and many other countries around the world.

The story behind the development of that product is interesting, according to Mr. Chikami, because it shines a light on how the

firm views itself in today's increasingly fast-paced age.

"We want," Mr. Chikami says, "to exist as a connector, filling the gaps in order to create new value. Any mediator needs to have extensive knowledge of the fields it wishes to connect, as well as the capacity to analyze what's missing and propose something new."

Looking to the future, therefore, the company is focusing more on collaborating with foreign entities and personnel in joint ventures. Key to this enterprise will be the hiring of employees who can operate as a bridge between Chikami and overseas companies.

"Having talent that can bridge gaps will be key to our company's growth," concludes Mr. Chikami. "Many companies would like to hire creators and inventors; our focus is on employees who can act as connectors."



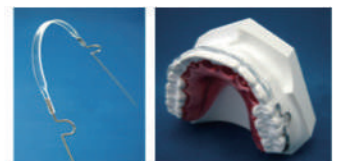
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