



www.TobinKeio.com

tobin@fbc.keio.ac.jp

Birthing Entrepreneurs in a Groupthink Nation

As the days of lifelong employment fade away, an entrepreneurial generation emerges -- entrepreneur diplomas in hand.

By John Sorenson

Robert Tobin is excited. Three years ago, the professor of business and commerce at Keio University founded the Change and Creativity program. At the time, universities were still churning out salarymen for the big companies and entrepreneurship was a little known -- and somewhat threatening -- foreign concept. Things have changed. "There's so much going on now," he says. "I get thrilled every day."

Tobin, a giant of a man who seems to have spent a considerable amount of time lifting heavy things, talks about his recent forays into the Hokkaido hinterlands, where he found entrepreneurs engaged in computers, software development, and winemaking, and to Kumamoto, where entrepreneurs are "springing up in the farmland." VCs call him weekly to help them find "good kids with new ideas."

Tobin started the program at Keio to help students understand change and learn about their creativity. The major goal was to encourage them to look at different career opportunities, including entrepreneurship. With Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken" as inspiration, he designed exercises to help students think differently, and arranged for them to meet some of Japan's most successful entrepreneurs, including Softbank's Masayoshi Son and Rakuten's Hiroshi Mikitani (who, he says, gave freely of themselves and stayed as long as students wanted them to).

There's debate, of course, about whether entrepreneurship is something that can, or should, be taught. "The best education for entrepreneurs is the school of hard knocks," says Peter Fuchs, director of the Risk Management Center, at SAS Institute Japan. "It's not a subject that needs to be taught, it's a job that needs to be done."

Perhaps, but more than 30 universities and colleges in Japan -- including Tokyo, Kyoto, and Osaka universities -- now have their own venture-business laboratories, according to Kazue Muroi, recently departed from the Pacific Rim Initiative of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Kyoto University, for example, has a Venture Business Laboratory that, besides working as a liaison between academia, industry, and government, offers seminars on patents, entrepreneurship, and venture capital.

Students in these programs are encouraged to work as interns at small venture firms, not just big companies. And some engineering departments have begun offering classes on the patent system and business management.

Graduates from these programs tend to be more open to information sharing, says May Leong, director of Webgrlls International. "They're more open, sharing," she says. "It's more like, 'Hey, here's what I'm doing -- what are you doing? Or what can you do that will fit into a plan that we can do together?' In today's world, if you have a reputation for giving information, that's real power."

"The kids use the club system," Tobin agrees. "There's a whole network of entrepreneurs helping each other."

One thing that concerns Tobin is the traditional Japanese attitude toward failure, an essential part of the entrepreneurial experience. "We have to get people to look at failure in a different way," he says. "And we have to encourage students and help them deal with that issue of risk."

Leong thinks that Japanese society is changing its attitude toward risk and entrepreneurship. "With more entrepreneurs striking out and being successful, and the media covering this, people are starting to be aware that this is a possibility for a career." Big companies, in fact, are finding it increasingly difficult to attract the best young minds, who are going to work for Silicon Valley-type startups. Jun Saeki, a twenty-something who founded d-plugin, says he's heard that small-company salaries have now surpassed those of large companies. "The word entrepreneurship is no longer a minor one," he says. "Everybody knows it."

The overwhelming feeling in Japan today is one of positive expectation. The country has endured 10 years of recession, and there's a feeling of emergence, even blossoming. "VCs look at Japan as untapped virgin territory," Tobin says. "I'm very optimistic about the future"