



▶ *Toru Segawa*, manager for Marketing & Communications in Japan, and *Tomoko Yajima*, manager of Customer Relations, at a blood drive marathon held by Cook Medical Japan in 2021 as part of their DEI efforts.

# Fostering a culture of diversity, equity, and inclusion

**Tomoko Yajima** reflects on her journey to becoming Cook Medical Japan's Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion (DEI) coordinator

**F**or the first two decades of her professional career, **Tomoko Yajima** worked as a nurse in Japan and later as a lab technician at a research facility in San Diego, where her family had relocated for her husband's job.

During her stint as a nurse, Tomoko was put in charge of a young man who had a heart condition and who was also developmentally challenged. Years later, it is that experience that Tomoko identified as her informal introduction to the concept of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

"It was sometimes difficult to communicate with him," recalled Tomoko, who is the manager of the Customer Relations team at Cook Medical Japan as well as her facility's DEI coordinator. "Sometimes it was difficult to understand what he wanted. But I continued to try communicating with him and I started to understand him. It was a hard time, but I think I learned a lot of things from him."

One of the most important things she learned from that patient was actually something she learned about herself.

"Before I communicated with him, I think I had a bias (toward people who are facing developmental challenges)," Tomoko explained. "During that time period I began to understand that I shouldn't have bias. I shouldn't decide what the person is before I know them as a human being."

It's that sort of empathy and self-awareness that made her an ideal candidate to lead Cook Medical Japan's DEI efforts.

### Looking for a new challenge

Tomoko had decided to become a nurse because of her mother, who was the chief of the nursing department at a small clinic.

"When I was young, I visited the clinic several times, and seeing how my mom worked and communicated

with the patients it made me want to be a nurse," she said.

In 2014, her family returned to Japan after having spent 13 years in the United States. Tomoko decided the time was right for a career shift.

"I liked the challenge of doing different work from nursing," she said. "And I can now speak a little bit of English, so maybe I can use that in my work."

Through an employment service Tomoko learned about Cook. As it is for many people, it was the description of the company's culture that immediately resonated with her.

"Cook is a family-friendly company and they take care of employees and their families," she said.

And, having spent time as a nurse in a cardiology department, Tomoko was also very familiar with stent graft technology and procedures—one of the cornerstones of Cook's business.

She started as a specialist for Customer Relations, where she was part of the team taking complaint reports from the field and translating them from Japanese to English and then loading them into the global complaint system. Three years ago, Tomoko was named manager of the department.

### Understanding DEI

In October 2020, at the request of Cook Medical Japan Chief Operating Officer (COO) **Greg Mullinax**, Tomoko took the reins of the company's DEI efforts.

"I did not know a lot about diversity, equity, and inclusion," she said. "I had to learn what it was first before I started. I talked with Greg about it—he is from the United States, but he also understands Japanese culture. We talked a lot about how we could conduct DEI activities in Japan."

The DEI team's first task was to identify the populations in Japan



▲ Tomoko Yajima

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– Tomoko Yajima, manager of the Customer Relations team and DEI coordinator at Cook Medical Japan

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that were most in need of assistance. Two of the groups that immediately caught their attention were the elderly, who make up close to 30% of Japan's population, and children—the child relative poverty rate in Japan in 2019 was around 15%.

Tomoko was shocked by that last number. As a mother of two (a 20-year-old son and a 18-year-old daughter) she knows that many doors could be closed to children who are not able to take advantage of the educational opportunities available to students in Japan.

"Many of these children don't have access to afterschool activities—which we call 'juku' (translates as 'cram school'—basically tutoring)—for those who want to attend college or university," Tomoko explained. "For example, children who only have one parent most of the time can't go to afterschool programs. I was shocked about that, I didn't know that. Those children have a future—so I like to support them. That's why we decided to support education for young children."

### Leading by example

Like any good leader, Tomoko knew she couldn't ask others to do something that she wasn't willing to do herself. So, in February 2021, she began volunteering with Kidsdoor, a non-profit organization that offers a variety of services for children in need.

About once a month, Tomoko spends two to three hours working with a different student. Usually they meet in person and worked on a wide variety of school subjects. When Japan went into lockdown because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the sessions moved to virtual and the focus was solely on learning English.

Tomoko still remembers her first tutoring session.



▲ **Mamoru Tanaka**, manager for Finance at Cook Medical Japan and **Toru Segawa**, Marketing & Communications in Japan, clean up trash around the office building.

*"I would like to work to become an organization where everyone can open their hearts and understand each other without fear."*

– Tomoko Yajima

"For the first 30 minutes, I felt very, very nervous," she admitted. "But the student was very friendly and had an open mind, so I became more comfortable talking with them. I think the first session finished successfully."

During her time in San Diego, Tomoko became quite proficient at speaking English. But she has less confidence in her knowledge of English grammar. Thankfully, her children attended American schools while growing up—so she can use them as a resource when she is unsure about something.

Seeing the big picture is a big motivation for Tomoko as she prepares for each meeting with a student.

"This is very important because this is a big part of their future," she said. "If they have the proper support, they can go to college and they will get a good job. It creates a bright future for them."

### Expanding DEI

Tutoring students was just one of the DEI initiatives that Cook Medical Japan chose to pursue in 2021. They held a blood drive marathon, food donation drive, and donated office supplies to a school for children who cannot live with their parents.

While she is pleased with employees' response to those efforts, Tomoko is hoping to get even more of her colleagues



► **Sachie Harada**, an Inventory controller at Cook Medical Japan, hangs flyers for a food drive put on by DEI in 2021.



▲ Donations gathered for the food drive.

involved in DEI work in 2022. One key, she believes, will be to show others that giving back to your community benefits everyone, not just those receiving assistance.

"I feel I am growing by doing volunteering," Tomoko said. "I am continually learning by doing volunteering. But I think it depends on the people—I can tell them what I'm doing, but I don't want to force them to volunteer. They have to decide for themselves whether or not to do it."

"I would like to work to become an organization where everyone can open their hearts and understand each other without fear," she continued. "By 2025, Cook Medical Japan aims to be an organization that fosters a DEI culture, so that individuals can maximize their abilities."

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