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京・赤坂の日本財団

私は経験から、経済的に自

います。

由なことは身体的にも自由

## Interview: A Modern Tale

Employing Persons with Disabilities - Towards Empowerment Opportunities

Develop IT Skills and Change Your World: Thomas Ng (President, Genashtim)

Information technology (IT) has changed the world, not just for us, but also for persons with disabilities. I have been actively employing people with visual and other forms of disability to work in my online business - English conversation classes via the Internet phone service "Skype". We're based in the Philippines but currently expanding elsewhere.

We've just begun an English conversation business in Japan and China too. Of the twenty-five teachers we employ, three are visually impaired. Five of our secretaries use a wheelchair. What we look for in our teachers is not a high level of education. As long as the teacher has an accent and pronunciation similar to that of a European or American native, they get the same salary, irrespective of whether or not they have a disability.

One of our teachers is a blind twenty-three year old female university student. She obtained the position because of her good English accent. During her interview, I asked her how she got such a good accent, and she said it had just come naturally through chatting with American friends late at night on Skype.

The persons with disability that I hire are all highly skilled, and I'm confident that the business will work well with them. If they have a computer at home that lets them participate in the world of the Internet, they can work. I think that when people with disabilities realize that in the Internet world, they are no longer "disabled", it is a huge confidence boost. And of course the opposite also applies - if they feel valueless, it will be hard

for them to feel confident about themselves. I want to make it possible for persons with disabilities to earn money for and by themselves.

Visually impaired individuals are not only highly productive, but are also trustworthy and stable. When such individuals develop IT skills their world just turns on its head. Getting around outside the house presents a challenge for persons with disabilities, but with IT, these challenges disappear.

Filipinos are very competent in English, and as many as 500,000 have been outsourced by European and US companies. The call center industry in particular is growing right now.

Call center workers earn a pretty good income for the Philippines, though their monthly take home pay is 400 dollars at most. English teachers working 40 hours a week receive an average monthly salary of 700 dollars. Experience has led me to believe that economic freedom is close to physical freedom.

In Japan, people with disabilities are supported by the government, but in the Philippines such support is rare. In Japan, most people think that it is important that persons with disability are able to get outside the home and take part in society, but in the Philippines such persons find themselves in an unfriendly environment the moment they step out of their house.

My secretary is disabled, and uses a wheelchair. He arranges my schedule, and books flights and hotels from his home for 400 dollars a month. Up until last year, he earned just 100 dollars a month through Internet survey work. With a fourfold increase in salary, he now has freedom. He is not being helped by others, rather he is helping others. He works seven days a week without a break. But I didn't tell him to do that. "I'd rather have you dependent on me than me on you", he says.

I want to expand the Internet English conversation business to other countries in Asia. I've already had enquiries from hotels in Cambodia and Taiwan, as well as fast food restaurants in Thailand, and I'm trying to expand the business as we speak. I've been flooded with applications, but I'm going to try to employ persons with disabilities wherever possible. Interviewer, photographer: Hiroshi Tanabe, Kyodo News