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On-the-job learning works for undaunted, fearless PI

バイリンガル探偵事務所の代表を務める小山悟郎さん



© COURTESY OF GORO KOYAMA

Level ★★☆☆

バイリンガル探偵事務所Japan PIの代表を務める小山悟郎さんは、調査報告書の執筆や外国人顧客とのやり取りなど、日常の業務で英語を使い、国際案件に取り組んでいます。

世界探偵協会の会員でもある同氏に、30年近い探偵業のキャリアと英語習得までの道のりについて話を聞いた。

Goro Koyama, the founder of Japan PI, a bilingual private investigation agency based in Tokyo, speaks English with ease and confidence, but he's quick to point out "I never studied it abroad or went to a conversation school."

"My family just wasn't rich enough to send me to a language school," he says with a little laugh. "So I educated myself by watching a lot of movies and TV shows, and reading newspapers. I read The Japan Times, actually."

Now, as a member of international associations of private investigation, including the Council of International Investigators and the World Association of Detectives, he uses English regularly to create marketing material, discuss cases with clients and write reports.

"There are other Japanese companies in those associations, but most only speak Japanese," he says. "So in terms of communication, we have an advantage." Handling conflicts that arise from cultural and legal differences between countries takes tact, and there are countless differences.



"For example, we may have to tell an American client that if his hostess girlfriend is found escorting her client for dinner before or after her place of work is open, it's common practice in Japan. It doesn't mean that she is engaged in prostitution," he says. "For some business clients, we need to explain that Japanese company registry records don't include its shareholders' information, something that U.S. companies are not comfortable with."

Japan PI's clients span from private citizens to lawyers and institutions, around 80% of which are non-Japanese. Many of them, he says, require his company to locate people in Japan — whether it's a defendant trying to avoid a trial in another country or someone to whom legal documents urgently need to be delivered. Most of the clients find him via the Japan PI website, which he translated into English.

“When they call me, they speak in English,” he says. “So through the on-the-job conversations I've had with them, I've learned to become more fluent.”

His enthusiasm for learning the language, though, began in junior high school, before any aspirations to become a private investigator. Unlike most of his classmates, Koyama was undaunted by reading aloud and speaking in English lessons, a lack of inhibition that he credits to his upbringing as the son of theater actors.

“My parents were always reciting and learning lines by heart in the home,” he recalls. “And I realized the effectiveness of saying something out loud when it comes to learning a language.”

That fearless approach to learning continued at college, where Koyama made a few unusual career choices that led to private investigating. Harboring a dream of becoming a writer, he took on several side jobs — he describes them as “sleazy” — hoping the experiences would give him material for stories. After being a human guinea pig for drug trials, a door-to-door salesman and doing other odd jobs, he says he realized that “rather than studying in college, I wanted to learn something on the job, on the streets and connected to society.”

To explore the lower echelons of Tokyo life and get to know people that he had come to admire for their tenacity and street smarts, Koyama quit university to join a private investigation agency as an intern. It was a low-paying but informative job that he stuck at for 10 years until he set up Japan PI in 2002.

“My primary role back then was to be a surveillance investigator,” he says. “I still do that, but now I'm more interested in how new technology can aid surveillance — like tiny hidden cameras, WiFi-networked cameras and facial recognition apps.”

Though PI work has brought Koyama his fair share of dealing with undesirable characters, including gangsters, he admits that it is nothing like that of the Western TV shows that he enjoyed in his youth. There is no licensing system for PIs in Japan, and Japanese police never share information with investigators.

“So we rarely handle criminal cases,” he says. Working with U.S. clients, however, has given him opportunities unavailable in Japan. “I once received an assignment from the Innocence Project, based in the U.S., which deals with wrongful convictions. They needed me to get a DNA test from a Japanese person related to a case,” says Koyama. “For that I also got to work with the public defender’s office in the U.S., which was exciting as there’s also no public defender’s office in Japan.”

Still, his passion for American crime and gangster movies has served him well when it comes to learning English. “You know Tony in Scarface was asked ‘Where did you learn English?’ ” he says thoughtfully. “He answered that he watched a lot of movies and that James Cagney and Humphrey Bogart taught him to talk.” (Mio Yamada)

Words to live by

What doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

ドイツの哲学者フリードリヒ・ニーチェの言葉です。気分が落ち込んだ時にはこの言葉を思い出すと気楽に考えられて、自分が殺されたとしても、後世ではより強い人間となれそうな気がするのです。

プロフィール

小山 悟郎 (こやま ごろう)

1970年、東京都生まれ。1993年、中央大学文学部史学科中退後、総合探偵社、日本追跡調査センターに入社。調査員の経験を積み、2002年に独立。(株)JapanPI(旧クイックリサーチ)の代表取締役兼主任調査員を務める。WAD(世界探偵協会)の会員。

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