

# JAPAN STORIES

*Voices from Representatives of  
U.S. Based Japanese Companies*



## JAPAN STORIES INTRODUCTION

In 2021, Japanese manufacturers in the U.S. employed 533,100 Americans. This is the highest level ever recorded for Japan, an 84.2% increase since 2010, and ranked #1 among all foreign investor countries. In 37 states, U.S. based Japanese companies ranked in top 3 for the total number of employees in 2021.

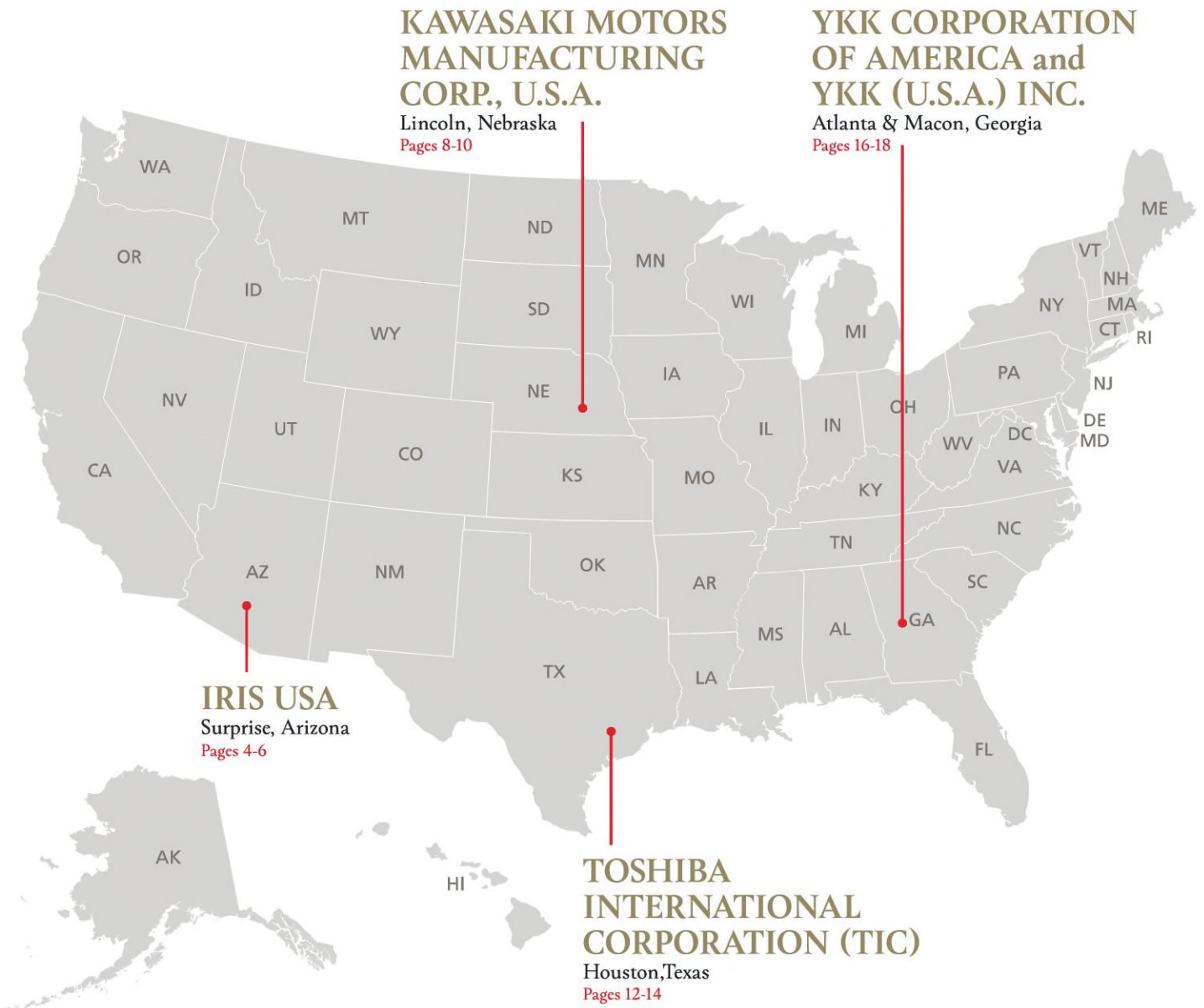
Japan's U.S. direct investment data is compelling and we at JETRO will continue to analyze and publish it. However, there's much more than data to convey.

It is important to listen to the voices of employees of Japanese manufacturers in the U.S. Therefore, team members from JETRO's U.S. offices officially visited and conducted in-depth interviews with representatives of Japanese manufacturing companies in the United States including Kawasaki Motors Manufacturing Corporation, U.S.A. (Nebraska), YKK (U.S.A) Inc. (Georgia), IRIS U.S.A. Inc. (Arizona), and Toshiba International Corporation (TIC) (Texas). We simply let company representatives, from presidents, to managers, to team members talk, we carefully listened and then confirmed their perspectives and opinions into a document.

Japan Stories provides a close look of each company's relationship with their local communities and as well as the current expectations they have of their state and local governments. And importantly, our interviewees will explain what it is like to build a career with a Japanese manufacturer invested in the United States. We at JETRO are honored to present their insights and personal narratives in Japan Stories: Voices from Representatives of U.S. Based Japanese Companies.



# INTERVIEWS





# IRIS USA

Surprise, Arizona



## INTERVIEWEES



Hiroyuki Takahashi  
President



David Rivas  
Assistant Machine Maintenance Manager

## BUSINESS OVERVIEW

IRIS USA main business focus is in manufacturing and sales of plastic products to the general public. To fulfill our customer needs on Home Appliances and other product categories that we currently do not manufacture in the states, we import products from our group companies in China and other Asian countries. Our main sales channels are through Big box retailers and ecommerce.

IRIS USA has manufacturing facilities in Arizona, Wisconsin, Texas, and Pennsylvania. The Arizona facility located in Surprise, Arizona was built with an investment of \$50 million and began operations in 2016. The Arizona facility also serves as the company's headquarters. IRIS USA has just under 500 employees, with each facility operating with around 100 employees, with an additional 80 office employees working at the Arizona facility.

## BUSINESS SITUATION

IRIS USA strives to increase sales in its core plastic product business for the general public, as well as creating and expanding new businesses in other markets. From around 2018, we have started to import circulators and have entered the home appliance market. Our circulators' compact, powerful, yet quiet features were well received by the US consumers and have successfully sold over 1 million products. We were also one of the quickest companies to adapt to the increasing demands for masks during COVID by creating mask production lines in the states.

The core value of IRIS Group is to create "Solutions for Everyday Living" and to enrich people's lives. IRIS USA follows this core value and are always seeking to create new business based on it.

## CONTRIBUTION TO LOCAL COMMUNITIES

As part of our contribution to the local community, we actively support factory tours for local schools, inviting local residents to our annual warehouse sale, and provide employment opportunities through our participation in job fairs. Of course, these steady efforts are important, but the most important contribution is to create a positive cycle of expand business, increase employment, and further invest in capital to grow the business. Over the past five years, we have invested \$172 million in capital expenditures throughout the United States and we want to continue this healthy growth.

# Hiroyuki Takahashi

President

"...the most important contribution (to the local community) is to create a positive cycle of expand business, increase employment, and further invest in capital to grow the business."

## RESPONSIBILITY

*Could you tell us about your existing responsibilities?*

As president, my main focus is to smoothly run IRIS USA's business and report to headquarters in Japan. I also adjusted IRIS' business management style to properly fit the US culture.

Since IRIS USA sells consumer products, the U.S. market size is very attractive. If one product becomes a hit, the sales volume you can expect is many times more than what it would be in Japan. In addition, we expect consumer expenditure to continue to grow, and the underlying potential for further increases in demand is also very attractive. My biggest mission is to accurately capture such demand and consider further investments if necessary.

## CAREER HISTORY

*Please tell us about your career background. How long have you been working for this company?*

In May 2024, it will mark my sixth year since I've become President of IRIS USA. Prior to my current position, I worked for IRIS Ohyama in Japan for about 20 years. I participated in projects that successfully got our parent company into new markets such as the Home Appliance business and the production and sales of rice. In the past I also managed overseas subsidiaries from Japan.

## CHALLENGES

*What challenges are you currently facing in your business? Is there anything specific you would like local leaders to understand or work together on?*

Securing new employees is becoming difficult since the Phoenix, Arizona area has recently seen large investment from TSMC and Intel. In addition, our average tenure for employees is only 6 years and we feel that employee retention is also a challenge we face.

## RELATIONSHIP WITH EMPLOYEES

*It is said that the relationship between employee and the company is different in Japan and in US., but how do you consider your employees? What are your thoughts about your employees and company relationship?*

While we understand the culture to change jobs for career advancement. As a company, we still want people to stay with us longer and I feel that there is a gap here. To resolve this, a structure for career advancement within the company and a structure to have employees participate in corporate management is needed. For instance, we will create a structure so managers can propose improvement plans. We disclose company-wide directions and activities as much as possible to managers so that they themselves can think what steps the company should take and what actions their department needs to take in order to actualize it. We also have a training program that allows local employees to work at our Headquarters in Japan for 2 years. Under these structures, we try to nurture a sense of unity.



## EXPECTATIONS OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES

*What do you expect the local /state government leaders to do for your business? What can the local communities do for you?*

Since IRIS USA mainly focuses on consumer products, we do not have opportunities to interact with government officials. We would like state and local governments to inform us about subsidies, regulations, and other information that would be beneficial to our business, as well as the challenges they face. This may seem surprising, but with our vast business engagement in various countries besides the US, we as IRIS Group have many problem-solving methods and know-hows. By solving these issues with them, we will grow as a company and create a Win-Win relationship.



## David Rivas

Assistant Machine  
Maintenance Manager\*

"Honestly, I love working here. They give you the opportunity to grow. They are always looking out for you...they make sure you are comfortable; they make sure you learn your skills. I like the way they will help you out."

### PERSONAL BACKGROUND

*Could you tell us about yourself? Where are you from?*

I was born and raised in El Paso, Texas. I started working 16 years ago as a machine operator for a plastics manufacturer that made vacuums. I took an interest in being a mold changer and my supervisor moved me into that position. After that, I became a processor, setting up machines.

After working in El Paso, I left to come to Phoenix. That was 12 years ago. I started my current job at Iris USA 7 years ago. When I started at Iris, I started as a PE – a process engineer – in charge of doing mold changes, setting parameters for the machines. I was then promoted to machine maintenance technician, machine maintenance supervisor and now I am the Assistant Machine Maintenance Manager.

### DAILY TASK

*Please tell us about your current responsibility in the company.*

As Assistant Machine Maintenance Manager my responsibility is to make sure all the injecting molding machines are up to date with preventative maintenance, make sure all the components are in working condition. I also schedule the personnel to do the mold changes and troubleshoot any problems.

### JOINING IRIS

*Is there anything that you would like to share with us about the reason or motivation behind your decision to work for this company?*

Coming to Iris, one of the best reasons to join were the benefits that were offered, they are really good. The work schedule offered worked out very well for me, and the compensation as well.



### ACCOMPLISHMENT

*Could you please share your stories that make you feel accomplished during work?*

Here at IRIS, there's been many things I feel I have accomplished. Especially when we get molds that other facilities have not been able to get going...I'm able to get them going. After the long COVID period, I implemented the "Monday Start Up" back to work policies to make a smooth transition.

### WORKING ENVIRONMENT

*How do you feel about the working environment and the treatment of employees at your company? Is there any specific point you would like to share?*

Honestly, I love working here. They give you the opportunity to grow. They are always looking out for you...they make sure you are comfortable; they make sure you learn your skills. I like the way they will help you out. They will stop doing what they are doing to help you out.

### FINAL COMMENTS

*Could you give us a final comment about working at this company?*

All I can say is IRIS is a great company to work for. If you take care of them, they will take care of you and give you an opportunity to grow with the company. I hope to one day become the Assistant Plant Manager and play a greater role controlling the production floor.

*\*Following this interview, David Rivas was promoted to Assistant Production Manager.*





# KAWASAKI MOTORS MANUFACTURING CORP., U.S.A.



Lincoln, Nebraska

## INTERVIEWEES



Mike Boyle  
President of KMM



Bryan Saucerman  
Director of Operations Rail Car Division

## BUSINESS OVERVIEW

Kawasaki Motors Manufacturing Corporation, U.S.A. (KMM) is a manufacturer having 4300 employees in three different plants.

The Consumer Products Division of KMM opened in Lincoln in 1974, the first foreign vehicle manufacturing company in the U.S. The General-Purpose Engine Division opened in Maryville, Missouri in 1989. The GPE Division casts, machines and assembles engines primarily for the lawn and turf care industry. The GPE division also produces Utility Vehicle engines for the Lincoln Plant and other UV manufacturers. The Rail Car Division began production in Lincoln in 2001. This division manufactures subway and commuter rail cars for metropolitan transit authorities, primarily for use on the east coast.

The Aerospace Division opened in 2017 in Lincoln. This division manufactures aircraft structures, which is currently building cargo doors for the Boeing 777 and the new 777X aircraft. In October 2021, their newest plant opened in Boonville, Missouri to assemble general purpose engines.

KMM purchases product designs from their parent companies, Kawasaki Heavy Industries, LTD in Japan, and produces the products and sells them to their sales and marketing companies. Kawasaki's philosophy is to manufacture products where they are used.

## BUSINESS SITUATION

Production in all three plants is increasing, therefore they are increasing manpower and production equipment. The market for 4 wheeled products and Jet-skis is growing in North America, however there is concern of an economic slow-down recession which may affect certain products. Production of the R211 rail cars for New York City is being ramped up. This is a large contract with the potential of manufacturing more than 1600 cars. The commercial aircraft industry was affected by COVID, however it is recovering, and the production is almost back to normal.

As KMM increases production and manpower, it is critical for them to maintain high product quality. Their motto is "Quality before Quantity", meaning they will delay delivery if the product quality is not achieved.

## CONTRIBUTION TO LOCAL COMMUNITIES

KMM is one of the larger employers in each of the three cities where our plants are located. As a manufacturer, we spend more than \$500M on U.S. parts, materials, and service suppliers to support our business activities. KMM also provides donations to local charities, schools, and community projects. Our staff also volunteers their time to many causes. Over the years we have formed great partnerships with our local communities.

## Mike Boyle

President of KMM

"At KMM we believe our culture is a blend of the best characteristics of Japanese discipline, tenacity, and attention to detail with American creativity, optimism, and flexibility."

### RESPONSIBILITY

*Could you share your thoughts about the relationship your company has with local communities? How does your company and/or employees contribute to local communities?*

My responsibility as President of KMM, is that I first consult with the staff at our parent companies in Japan to align the direction of our company. I oversee the four divisions in KMM and ensure that they are operating smoothly. Our four divisions manufacture different products, have different cultures, and report to different business segments within the global network of Kawasaki, but we are "One Kawasaki". I try to promote synergy and cooperation within all divisions to enhance our overall strength as a technically diverse company. Finally, and most important is to maintain good relationships with our three parent companies in Akashi, Gifu, and Hyogo, Japan.

*Please tell us about your career background. How long have you been working for this company?*

I began working at KMM after graduating from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, with a degree in Mechanical Engineering, in 1984. My first job was in production engineering working on motorcycle and JetSki processes. I was eventually promoted to engineering manager and later managed the Information Systems, Production, Quality and Process Improvement departments, throughout my career. In 2007, I was promoted to vice president and plant manager of the Lincoln Plant. In 2017, I was promoted to senior vice president of the Lincoln and Maryville Plants, and on January 1, 2022, I was promoted to president of KMM's three plants.

### JAPANESE COMPANY

*What do you consider to be advantages or synergy of Japanese companies in the U.S.?*

If done well, the blended strengths of the Japanese and U.S. cultures can provide a tremendous advantage. At KMM we believe our culture is a blend of the best characteristics of Japanese discipline, tenacity, and attention to detail with American creativity, optimism, and flexibility. This culture has been very successful at KMM for almost 50 years. One of our challenges is the 14-hour time difference. This may create communication challenges, but it allows us to solve critical problems quickly by working around the clock.

### RELATIONSHIP WITH EMPLOYEES

*It is said that the relationship between employee and the company is different in Japan and in US., but how do you consider your employees? What are your thoughts about your employees and company relationship?*

In the U.S., employees are very involved with their children's activities, social activities with friends, engaged in sports and other hobbies. We try to balance this independent mindset with building strong relationships at work, thereby organizing employee appreciation events during work hours to minimize our employees time away from their family and friends.



### CHALLENGES

*What challenges are you currently facing in your business?*

KMM is experiencing two major challenges, workforce, and parts supply. They are focusing on recruiting and retaining staff. A large amount of their new capital investment is in automation to assist with reducing the workforce shortage. The pandemic made the parts supply problem more difficult than it already was. For example, the rail car supplier network in the U.S. is not strong. Rail car contracts with "Buy America" requirements are extremely difficult and this drives up the cost while not providing the latest technology.

### WORKING WITH LOCAL AND STATE LEADERS

*Have you worked with local or state government leaders?*

KMM works with local and state leaders often. We provide economic development support by allowing companies looking to potentially locate in Nebraska or Missouri to tour our plants and interview our staff. We also provide management training to the Nebraska government so they can establish lean practices. We have asked for assistance with improving business practices, reduce/stop unfair or frequent plant inspections and permitting requirements and reduce the length of new construction permits.

### EXPECTATIONS OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES

*What do you expect the local /state government leaders to do for your business?*

I expect local and state governments to be a partner in creating an environment where business can thrive. The highest percentage of personal and business tax is allotted to schools. Currently, the education provided does not match the jobs local businesses provide. Therefore, people move away to find jobs in their fields of education. Local communities need to greatly improve the integration of education requirements and education funding to align with the jobs businesses provide.

## Bryan Saucerman

Director of Operations Rail Car Division

“I am so fortunate to work here, there have been so many great experiences, and I have learned so much. With the number of opportunities, I have had, I cannot imagine working anywhere else.”

### PERSONAL & PROFESSIONAL

*Could you tell us about yourself?*

I am originally from Colorado, my wife and I reside in Lincoln, Nebraska. I studied Chemical Engineering at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and graduated in 1988 and decided to stay in Nebraska. I also have a Master of Strategic Studies degree from the U.S. Army War College. I had a dual career for many years in the Nebraska Army National Guard, aspects of which have helped me in my 34 year career at Kawasaki.

While I was attending college, I did not know about Kawasaki Motors Manufacturing Corporation, U.S.A. (KMM) existed. After graduating, I saw an advertisement in the local newspaper that KMM was looking to hire a paint engineer. I had never heard of a paint engineer before. I applied and I was lucky to be hired in 1989.

The year I joined KMM, it was the 15th anniversary for the KMM operation in Lincoln. After working as a paint engineer, my work was then expanded to include fiberglass and fiberglass processes. For my first 12 years at KMM, I worked in the consumer products division which produces All-Terrain Vehicles, Utility Vehicles, Personal Watercraft, and Recreation Utility Vehicles.

In 2000, Kawasaki announced plans to establish a rail car division at the Lincoln facility, and in 2001, passenger rail car production began. Then my early responsibilities in the rail car division included quality inspection of the rail cars, as well as interfacing with the customers. I continued to progress in the rail car division in various jobs. I continued to interface with our customer in each of my jobs - I strongly believe that “it is important to be an ambassador for your products”.

Since 2016, I have been responsible for management of the KMM rail car division. I had to learn new communication techniques for communication so I could better interface with the parent company in Japan. My daily responsibilities include managing the KMM rail car division and the operations necessary to deliver finished products to our sister company Kawasaki Rail Car, Inc. (KRC) in Yonkers, NY or directly to the customer commissioning site. Communication and managing the relationship and functions between KMM, our parent company, Kawasaki Railcar Manufacturing Co., Ltd. (KRM) in Japan and KRC in New York has been important to the success of our operations to meet customer requirements including ensuring safety, quality and “Buy America” requirements are met.



### ACCOMPLISHMENT & WORKING ENVIRONMENT

*Could you please share your stories of accomplishment and your work environment at KMM?*

“With any project, completing the project and moving on to the next makes you feel accomplishment. When the manufacturing process of a rail car or a group of rail cars is finished, and you deliver the final product to the customer, a great feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment is felt.”

KMM manufactures rail cars mainly for the U.S. northeast corridor, we are fortunate to have received orders and supplied over 2,900 commuter and subway cars to our customers since 2001, NYC Transit being our largest customer. Our cars have a 40 year design life and it is a product that helps people live their daily lives, so this also provides a feeling of satisfaction.

Kawasaki passenger rail cars are highly reliable and our customers also recognize that they can receive support quickly because of the Kawasaki network and expertise in three locations – Parent company KRM in Hyogo, Japan, KMM in Lincoln, NE, and KRC in Yonkers, NY, all three companies working as “One Kawasaki Team”. The contracts we have with NYC and other customers are secure projects, even during a recession.

The working environment at KMM is very good, and all facilities are top-notch in all divisions and we are fortunate to have a first class facility.

### JAPANESE COMPANY

*Have you ever been to Japan for business? Have you experienced working with Japanese colleagues?*

Throughout my career at KMM, I went to Japan 25 times for technology transfer, to learn about a new product and in more recent years for business planning and reporting. It has been great experience working with my Japanese colleagues, I value their support, advice and the daily collaboration has been vital to our growth and success as well as the leadership from our executives in Japan.



# TOSHIBA



# TOSHIBA INTERNATIONAL CORPORATION (TIC)



Houston, Texas

## INTERVIEWEES



**Ken Takagi**  
President and Chief Executive Officer



**Darwin Kusters**  
Director for Manufacturing

## BUSINESS OVERVIEW

Toshiba International Corporation (TIC) is a subsidiary of Toshiba America Inc. (TAI), a wholly owned subsidiary of Toshiba Corporation. TIC operates as a prominent player in the US market, with divisions specializing in Motors & Drives, Automotive Systems, Power Electronics, and Transmission & Distribution. Strategically headquartered in Houston, Texas, TIC has an extensive manufacturing facility spanning over 1,000,000 square feet on 55 acres which is Toshiba's largest in North America. We've been in Houston since 1973. With over 1,000 employees, this facility plays a crucial role serving as a hub for innovation, where skilled engineers develop cutting-edge products and technologies to enhance the efficiency and reliability of industrial systems. TIC is dedicated to providing comprehensive solutions to various industries, including general industrial, oil and gas, energy & utilities, datacenters, renewables, HVAC, water/wastewater, and mining.

## BUSINESS SITUATION

Despite global economic fluctuations, TIC managed to remain profitable and maintain a resilient position in the markets we serve. Our ability to navigate the challenges of the past fiscal year, while maintaining profitability, speaks to the resilience and strategic direction of our company. We are well-positioned to face future uncertainties with confidence.

While profitability is essential for our business sustainability, we are equally dedicated to our goal of achieving carbon neutrality. We recognize that addressing climate change is a global imperative, and we are proud to be part of the solution.

We contribute to Toshiba Corporation's global strategy of achieving carbon neutrality by supplying components for hybrid vehicles, electric motors, and components that support carbon capture. Our investments in digitization technologies that support remote monitoring, control, data analysis will reduce emissions.

By aligning our operations with sustainable practices and driving innovation in clean technologies, we aim to reduce our environmental impact and help our customers to do the same.

## CONTRIBUTION TO LOCAL COMMUNITIES

At TIC, we prioritize building strong relationships with local communities. For the last five years TIC has adopted Horne Elementary School which is one mile from our campus. We also organize local blood drives, food drives, tree plantings, and park cleanups, fostering a cleaner and healthier environment in our community. We are proud to engage in these activities, demonstrating our commitment to making a positive impact to the Houston community.

## Ken Takagi

President and CEO

By working hand in hand with government leaders and local communities, we can cultivate a symbiotic relationship that drives business success, promotes economic growth, and contributes to the overall well-being of the Houston community.

### CHALLENGES

*What challenges are you currently facing in your business? Is there anything specific you would like local leaders to understand or work together on?*

Like most businesses, we face challenges in the evolving market landscape. We ask local leaders to understand and collaborate on fostering innovation, addressing sustainability, supporting workforce development, and maintaining a favorable business environment. Collaborating with local leaders, we can overcome obstacles, drive growth, and create a sustainable future.

### RESPONSIBILITY

*Could you tell us about your existing responsibilities?*

I currently serve as President & CEO of three Toshiba companies in the United States: Toshiba America, Inc. (TAI), Toshiba America Energy Systems, Corp. (TAES), & Toshiba International Corporation (TIC). My responsibilities include leading the overall strategic direction of each organization, driving growth, fostering innovation, ensuring operational excellence, building strong customer relationships, and promoting a culture of collaboration, safety and sustainability. I also see myself as the lead champion for our Toshiba values.

### CAREER HISTORY

*Please tell us about your career background. How long have you been working for this company?*

By training I am a mechanical engineer. I began my career with Toshiba in 1993 working in steam turbine mechanical design. From 2004-2008 I served as Engineering Manager for TIC Power Systems Division in San Francisco, CA. Previously, I was President & CEO of Toshiba Energy Systems Corporation in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (2019-2022). Recently, I was appointed Chairman & CEO of TAI, TAES & TIC on December 1, 2023.



### JAPANESE COMPANY

*What do you consider to be advantages or synergy of Japanese companies in the U.S.?*

I believe Japanese companies in the U.S. possess several advantages and synergies. First, their strong emphasis on quality, reliability, and precision engineering fosters trust among customers. Second, their commitment to long-term relationships allows for stable partnerships and investments. Lastly, their culture of innovation enables the development of cutting-edge technologies and solutions.

### RELATIONSHIP WITH EMPLOYEES

*It is said that the relationship between employee and the company is different in Japan and in US., but how do you consider your employees? What are your thoughts about your employees and company relationship?*

I consider our employees to be the heart and soul of TIC. We prioritize fostering a positive and inclusive company culture, where employees are valued, respected, and empowered. We actively promote open communication, professional development, and work-life balance to create a supportive environment. Additionally, we organize various engagement activities, such as team-building events, recognition programs, and opportunities for employee feedback, to ensure their growth and well-being.

### WORKING WITH LOCAL AND STATE LEADERS

*Have you worked with local or state government leaders? If so, has their support been helpful? Please explain.*

We've had the opportunity to work closely with local and state government leaders. For example, our uninterruptible power supply (UPS) systems provide back up power to Houston's 911 call center. We've hosted the Mayor of Houston and executives from the Greater Houston Partnership. Their support has been instrumental in our success. Their partnership has been invaluable in driving growth, attracting investments, and creating a mutually beneficial relationship between our company and the government.



# Darwin Kusters

Director for Manufacturing

## PERSONAL BACKGROUND

*Could you tell us about yourself? Where are you from?*

I was born in Doon, Iowa. I have lived in St. Charles, Missouri, Los Angeles, California and now Katy, Texas. I am married. We have three children, and four grandchildren. I have been an employee of TIC for 33 years now and I love the Houston area. This is the city that I call home.

*Could you please explain about your professional background?*

I had a history of consumer electronics manufacturing at Compaq Computer Corporation and at Texas Instruments. But I was longing to get back into the electronics industry and in manufacturing. I wanted to become more involved in industrial power. I was looking for a change.

## JOINING TIC

*Is there anything that you would like to share with us about the reason or motivation behind your decision to work for this company?*

When I was a teenager, my first stereo system that I purchased was a Toshiba stereo system. I realized at a very early age the quality of Toshiba's name and that brand.

As I used to drive by Toshiba every day to commute to my university, I kept thinking back to that first stereo I purchased and its quality. I had passed by this facility a number of times and thought about stopping in or checking to see if they had open positions, and finally one day I did it.

## EXPERIENCES

*Please share your career history at TIC with us.*

I started out in Field Service and Inventory Management, and quickly moved into the Power Electronics Plant as a Planner. In 1996, I was asked to participate in our first transition to an ERP system. After it went live in 1998, I served in a post Go-live Support role, then I went back into the Power Electronics Plant as the Plant Manager. In 2012, as we had significant growth with our medium voltage drive products, I went into the Control Plant as Assistant Plant Manager then was promoted to Plant Manager, eventually took over the Plant Manager role of both the Control Plant and the Power Electronics Plant until 2021.

## DAILY TASK

*Please tell us about your current responsibility in the company.*

Oversight of all Motor, Control, and Power Electronics plant operations and management teams for responsible manufacturing processes while maintaining compliance in areas of employee safety, product quality, environmental management, and key performance indicators such as inventory reduction, on-time performance, productivity, and scrap reduction. Ensuring continuity of best practices as they relate to



continuous improvement ideas, employee training and development, succession planning, standard of conduct and corporate legal compliance.

## ACCOMPLISHMENT

*Could you please share your stories that make you feel accomplished during work?*

We experienced the growth from 2012 to 2014, and our challenge was to gradually raise the production to hit the goal of 90 drives in one month while we were building 30-40 drives on a really good month. While that was going on, we had the expansion of the plant. We broke new ground in June 2012 and we performed our ribbon cutting ceremony in July of 2013, and one month later in August, we produced our first medium voltage drive from the new plant.

That was a huge accomplishment for not only the management team, but TIC collectively as an organization, because it really took everyone being involved in that project; sales, shipping, the assembly employees, all of those groups coming together.

## WORKING ENVIRONMENT

*How do you feel about the working environment and the treatment of employees at your company? Is there any specific point you would like to share?*

I think some of the issues that we have today, they're similar to other organizations of this size. But I think what sets us apart is that management does monitor the employees. We do that through surveys that are conducted periodically.

In fact, the "learning and engagement center" that we constructed was the result of one of those surveys where our employees really voiced a concern that they felt like they needed more training.

## JAPANESE COMPANY

*Have you ever been to Japan for business? Have you experienced working with Japanese colleagues? Please explain your experience if you have. What are the advantages?*

Yes. It is my opinion that every trip is a new learning experience. The Japanese colleagues that I interacted with have always been very supportive. We in turn, also share in supporting any needs Japan may have. These experiences are a necessary part of developing strong relationships and trust.

## FINAL COMMENTS

*Could you give us a final comment about working at this company?*

In the years ahead, I would like to become more involved with sales and really understanding our customer applications. My focus is going to be in the following three areas: understanding more application related, customer related areas, and developing a leadership team.

From that leadership team, selecting a potential successor for my position would be very important.

# YKK®



# YKK CORPORATION OF AMERICA and YKK (U.S.A.) INC.

Atlanta & Macon, Georgia



## INTERVIEWEES



**Jim Reed**  
President, YKK Corporation of America



**Robin Barnhill**  
Director of Manufacturing, YKK (U.S.A.) INC

## BUSINESS OVERVIEW

YKK manufactures products in two main categories, (1) fasteners and (2) architectural products. Fasteners include zippers, plastic hardware, hook and loop fasteners, webbing tapes, and snap and buttons. For these products, there are apparel and industrial applications. In the United States, we also have an architectural products business which is segmented into residential and commercial categories (including doors and aluminum frames).

## BUSINESS SITUATION

Business is going well in the United States despite issues related to changes in workforce expectations and other factors effecting production.

## CONTRIBUTION TO LOCAL COMMUNITIES

The focus of YKK's philosophy is "No one prospers without rendering benefit to others." YKK is a privately held company driven by that philosophy and has been throughout our existence. That's our primary objective. We do this by being a valuable participant in the community. We improve the community and society by contributing in some way. i.e. do the most good while conducting business. Continuing to be a job provider, even in hard times is also part of our role.

YKK has always strived to be a visible and valuable member of the community. YKK remains very involved in the community and with local leaders. Some of our focuses include technical school programs and equipment training (workforce development). Some examples include our support of United Way and the Central Georgia Technical College (which does all the assessments for all of our mechanics). There is also a training room on our premises. Community engagement activities are also a priority for us. The company will continue to contribute to and participate in local initiatives. Many programs have been put in place to achieve this imperative and more will come.

## Jim Reed

President  
YKK Corporation of America

YKK's approach to local communities is to ask "What can YKK do for the community first? How can we help the community?" We are happy to do our part to make a tangible contribution to the community.

### PERSONAL BACKGROUND

*Please tell us about your career background.*

I was an exchange student in Japan in college. Upon my return to the U.S., I became a commercial real estate broker serving Japanese companies coming to the United States. Following that, I went to law school and practiced at a firm and also served as in-house counsel prior to my newest role as a president of YKK Corporation of America.

### RESPONSIBILITY

*Could you tell us about your existing responsibilities?*

This is the corporate headquarters in charge of all operating companies in the Americas. We provide compliance, corporate governance and professional services that are shared throughout the region. Corporate leadership aspects, personal tasks and scope of position include leading teams to grow the business and maintain and grow our philosophy of the "Cycle of Goodness," as determined by our founder, Mr. Tadao Yoshida.

### CHALLENGES CURRENTLY FACING IN BUSINESS

*What challenges are you currently facing in your business?*

I don't think people can fully appreciate the seismic changes brought on by the pandemic and the ripple effects and aftershocks the pandemic created in terms of logistics, supply chain (raw materials), workforce (hiring and retention) and now the effects of inflation. There is a transition in assessment of how people now think about work. Machines have thousands of parts and when one small part keeps that machine from being operational, it creates interruptions in production that then ripple throughout the entire system for the company and the customer.

### RELATIONSHIP WITH EMPLOYEES

*Tell us about relationships with employees*

YKK has become more employee-centric post-pandemic. Many more initiatives have been introduced to attract new employees and to add more value to the current workforce. For example, people do not want to come to the office 5 days a week from 8-5 (lifestyle changes). Office workdays for YKK Corporation of America at the office are now Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. Employees may work from home Tuesdays and Fridays. We also changed the compensation structure to be more flexible based upon the initiatives. We've altered and expanded



the maternal and paternal leave policy (now 6 weeks paid). A new advisory group has been established to learn how to more effectively engage employees as well. The focus will continue to be how to add value to our workforce.

### EXPECTATIONS OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES

*What do you expect the local /state government leaders to do for your business? What can the local communities do for you?*

YKK's approach to local communities is to ask "What can YKK do for the communities? How can we help the community?" We don't ask much from local leaders in terms of changing the rules. We are happy to do our part and pay our taxes to make a tangible contribution to the community. Our main focus is not just making money but making the community and society better for everyone.

### WORKING WITH LOCAL AND STATE LEADERS

*Have you worked with local or state government leaders? If so, has their support been helpful? Please explain.*

When considering working with local and state leaders, what we ask for is for a relationship with them, because things happen... for better and sometimes for worse, and we want to have the support of those local leaders to address those mistakes or missteps when they occur. This builds trust in the company while becoming a friend of the community. From the federal level, we ask that they ensure fair competition in the market.

## Robin Barnhill

Director of Manufacturing  
YKK (U.S.A.) Inc.

There are many benefits to working with American and Japanese workers. Cross-pollination has been great cross-culturally and for job enhancement. These diverse perspectives are invaluable.

### PERSONAL BACKGROUND

*Please tell us about your career background.*

I am from North Carolina. I attended North Carolina State's Textile school. I am from a family of cotton farmers, so this sparked my interest in the process of fabric production from the raw material.

Being from a family of cotton farmers, I developed an interest in textile chemistry and the science of textiles. My first job was with a manufacturer in Dublin that specialized in making woolen fabric. There I was able to utilize my background in dyeing and color matching.

Joining YKK's dye lab management team enabled me to use my expertise from school and interest in dyeing processes while utilizing my degree from school. I also found the diversity of the product offerings and applications attractive. Additionally, different end uses for products meant more stability for the company and as an employee.

I have been with the company for more than 15 years. I began in the dye lab for YKK and have moved recently to my position as director at the engineering center.

### RESPONSIBILITY

*Could you tell us about your responsibilities?*

In my current role, I am responsible for the day to day operations of production and planning within the plant. This includes work related to quality and environmental initiatives within the manufacturing process. Sustainability and factory automation is a big focus at YKK globally right now. The company will turn 50 next year and the workforce is changing as so many people begin to retire. Quality and productivity are both issues for me to focus upon as the new workforce is brought up to speed. Using automation to make jobs easier as well as bringing people up to



speed more quickly. This and other issues will continue to be top of mind in my role.

### ACCOMPLISHMENT

*Could you please share your stories that make you feel accomplished during work?*

It has been rewarding to develop new initiatives and to see projects come to full fruition from conception to realization. For example, increased projects related to sustainability are coming online, with new dye machines being made more efficient. Watching new projects develop and seeing how I have contributed to the team and the process is exciting.

### WORKING ENVIRONMENT

*How do you feel about the working environment and the treatment of employees at your company?*

There are many benefits to working with American and Japanese workers. This is still manufacturing at the end of the day, but the working conditions are always being improved and we can learn from our other locations all over the world. Especially from travel with work. Cross-pollination has been great cross-culturally and for job enhancement. These diverse perspectives are invaluable.

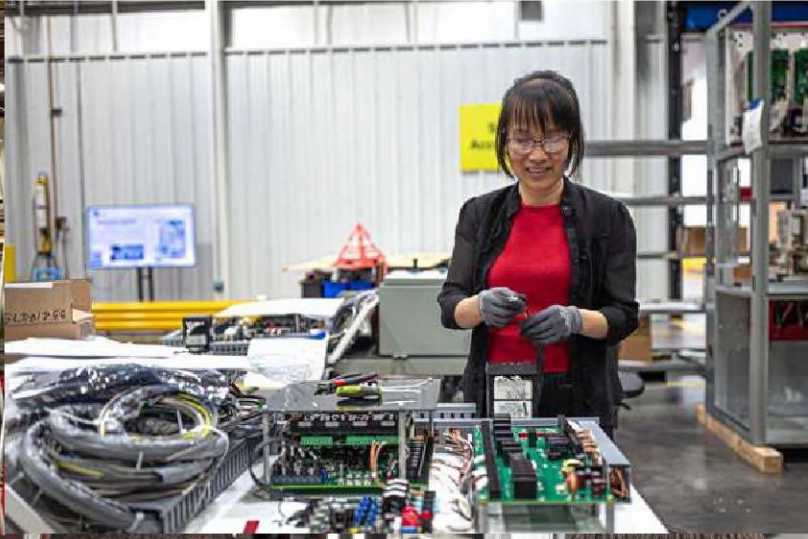
Japanese language would be a great skill to have in this work environment. It would go a long way. This in addition to becoming more globally sensitive with managerial issues and approaches from both sides is a value across all sectors of the operation.

In my previous position, I was able to visit other company locations, including Japan. This was an invaluable experience to learn from my colleagues abroad both from a technical and a cultural perspective.





*Japanese Companies' Team Members at Work*





## THE JAPAN – U.S. DIRECT INVESTMENT RELATIONSHIP AND JETRO’S ROLE

JETRO (Japan External Trade Organization) is the Government of Japan’s official trade and investment promotion agency.

We realize that trade and direct investment flows two-ways among countries. JETRO plays a significant role in assisting Japanese companies with establishing relationships in the United States to make an initial investment or add to an existing investment. Importantly, we are dedicated to assisting qualified U.S. companies develop an initial business presence in Japan or assist a U.S. company, which already has a Japanese business presence to expand their existing investment in Japan. We at JETRO have successfully assisted hundreds of foreign companies INVEST IN JAPAN and we will continue our efforts. It is the velocity of direct investment between Japan and the United States which JETRO will sustain and accelerate.

## ENABLING BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS IN JAPAN FOR STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

JETRO has built numerous relationships among U.S. state and local government leaders interested in supporting Japanese companies expand their investment presence in their communities. More and more, JETRO is working closely with state and local leaders to assist them in obtaining visibility in Japan.

With JETRO’s extensive and deep business network in Japan, the U.S. governors is able to speak directly with Japanese companies at state investment briefings in Tokyo. These investment briefings allow governors to explain to Japanese companies about the existing opportunities available for investment in their states. Beyond a governor’s presentation, they also interact with representatives of Japanese companies, confirming their commitment to building relationships leading to the possibility of future investments.

## ENGAGING JETRO TO CONNECT WITH JAPAN

At no other time in JETRO’s history has there been such a strong momentum from U.S. state and local leaders to call upon us to assist them to initiate and sustain relationships with Japanese companies and with their Japanese peers in prefectural and local governments. We are honored to work with these government leaders, and we wish to expand upon these relationships. We believe it is the sum of our efforts with state and local governments and Japanese companies that contribute to a foundation for a strong Japan-United States economic relationship.

## JETRO CONTACT INFORMATION

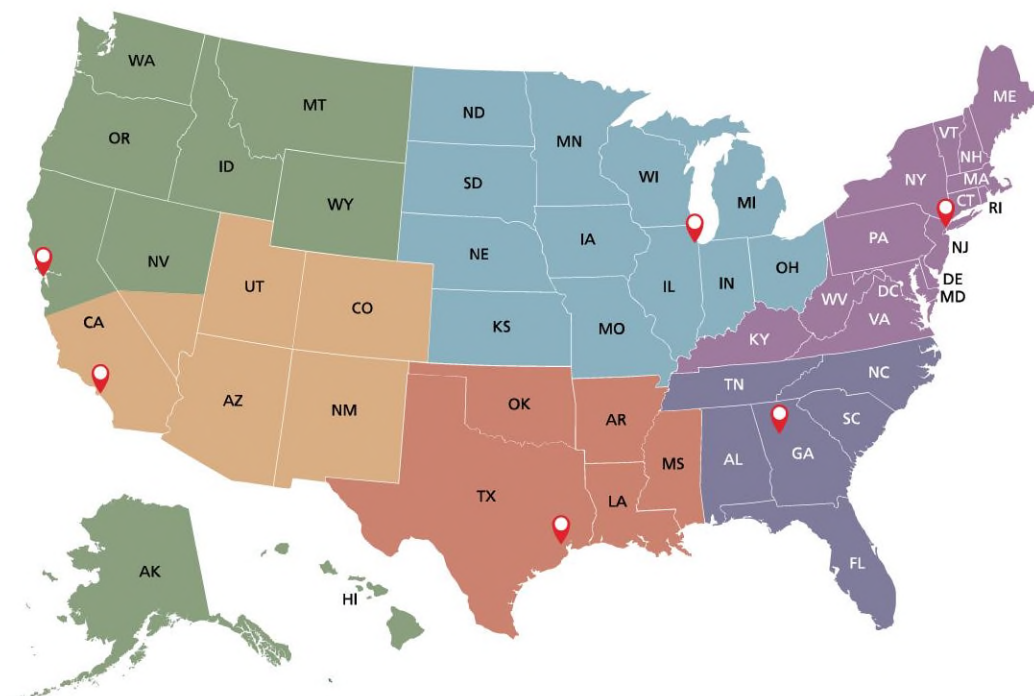
JETRO (Japan External Trade Organization) has an active mission in the United States focused on two-way trade and investment between Japan and the U.S.

For state and local governments, please contact us to discuss how we may work together to sustain existing and to support new investment from Japan in your region.

For all American companies wishing to discuss their business models for entering into Japan or simply needing to review their current business diligence on the Japanese market, please contact us.

### JETRO OFFICES IN U.S.

<b>New York:</b>	212-997-0400
<b>San Francisco:</b>	415-392-1333
<b>Los Angeles:</b>	213-624-8855
<b>Chicago:</b>	312-832-6000
<b>Houston:</b>	713-759-9595
<b>Atlanta:</b>	404-681-0600



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

### JAPAN-U.S. INVESTMENT REPORT

Japan's U.S. Investment Dynamic  
Understanding the Impact of  
Japanese Companies on the U.S.  
Economy



### DIGITAL INVESTMENT PROMOTION INITIATIVE

Messages from U.S. governors and  
state economic development leaders  
to Japan's business community.



### JETRO USA WEBSITE

Latest activities focused on  
JETRO's mission in the United  
States.



This material is distributed by JETRO on behalf of Japan External Trade Organization, Tokyo, Japan.  
Additional information is available at the Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.

Copyright (C) 2024 JETRO. All rights reserved

# JAPAN'S U.S. INVESTMENT DYNAMIC

