

Canada-Japan Co-op Program Experiential Report

Toshiba Corporation
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Introduction

Through the Co-op Japan Canada office I applied to JETRO positions. I was ecstatic to find a three-month internship position in Toshiba. It was a valuable opportunity to work in a leading Japanese corporation while fitting into my summer internship schedule. At the same time it was nice to get away from UBC and travel in a foreign country.

Fortunately I was accepted by Toshiba as a trainee for the summer term from May 9th to July 27th.

Work at Toshiba RDC

I was placed at the Toshiba RDC, the Research and Development Center of Toshiba. It is located in the Kawasaki city of Kanagawa prefecture. There is a wide array of research going on at RDC. For example, HD DVD, OLED, NAND flash memory. Specifically, my research was on the motion planning for a mobile manipulator system.

Prior to this internship, I took an introductory robotics course at UBC. It turned out that many of the mathematics and concepts I learned were directly useful to my research.

The previous knowledge provided me with a foundation for understanding the ongoing research in mobile manipulators. The internship was a good experience as it was motivating to see the theory being applied to actual systems. In addition it presented practical problems not shown in the theoretical studies.

The goal of the work term was to devise a motion planner for a humanoid robot. To do so I had to look up related papers and extract ideas for my work. Also I had to look into the mathematics theory behind the papers and journals. From time to time I received

help and suggestions from supervisor and co-workers. During the last part of the internship I was able to test the motion planning ideas on an actual robot with help from co-workers.

There are several differences between Japanese and North American work environments that came at a surprise to me. First of all, the cubicles are only half as high as the North American cubicles and they only surround the desk. This means you can easily see what others are doing while seated. Being used to my own office or full cubicle in the previous internships, this setup took some time to adapt to. On the other hand, this arrangement seems to facilitate better teamwork and communication.

Secondly I was amazed at the dedication of the Japanese employees to their work. It is very common for employees to willingly stay longer than the required work hours. Some people who have a lot of tasks at hand may even work more than 12 hours a day. This was very different from the more laidback North American west coast work culture I was exposed to in the previous internships.

Thirdly, I wasn't expecting people at Toshiba to speak English so well. This drastically improved my communication with the co-workers since I had limited Japanese language skills. Their ability to accommodate western culture and language demonstrates the amount of globalization that large Japanese corporations have gone through.

Lastly not very much independence was expected of me compared to internships in North America. I received a lot of help from supervisors and co-workers. Both my Toshiba

internship coordinator and supervisor took care of me at work and also outside of work.

In Canada, there is generally more separation between work and life. Typically the managers and co-workers spend less time taking care of the interns.

Life in Kanto Region

Toshiba arranged a dormitory for me in Tsurumi-Ku of Yokohama. It takes about 40 minutes to commute from my dormitory to work. Part of the commute involves boarding one of the most crowded rush hour train lines in the Kanagawa and Tokyo region. It was truly a unique experience of being “packed like a sardine”. Sometimes shoving is required for packing people in before the door closes. Such population density is the highest I have experienced.



Figure 1 – Queen’s plaza after fireworks, an extreme example of population density

During the weekdays life evolved around work and commuting. Other than sleep I spent less than three hours in the dormitory every weekday. After returning home I am generally too tired to do anything other than relaxing inside my room. On the weekends there were always something new and exciting to do. Being in Kanagawa you can get a mix of city life and outdoor excursions. On a sunny weekend I could go for hikes, sight seeing or marine sports. On a rainy weekend there are also many fallback activities available in central Tokyo. With such abundance of recreational activities, life in Japan is fairly busy and fast-paced.



Figure 2 – An example of outdoor activity, hiking Mt. Fuji



Figure 3 – An example of city life, night view of Yokohama bay side

Travelling in the Kanto region is extremely convenient with its sophisticated network of trains and subways. The Kanagawa and Tokyo train network is a dense web that allows one to go almost anywhere with just trains. It is the most convenient and efficient public transportation I have experienced.

Many foreign interns in Japan travel frequently and experience some communication barriers. Because of this it is very easy to become good friends with other foreigners in Japan. In Toshiba, I have met other foreign interns all over the world and became good friends with them in just two weeks. In a new environment and culture there are aspects that are difficult to adapt to. The other foreigners have turned out to be a great source for sharing concerns and reassurance as they experience the same difficulties.



Figure 4 – Japanese language class provided by Toshiba, providing connections to other foreign interns.



Figure 4 – Other Toshiba foreign interns and also travel companions

In terms of living expense, I have found that cost of living in Japan is very scalable. This is contrary to my impression of Japan's high living cost. My dormitory is provided without cost so the remaining expenses are food and travel. There are many choices for food with a wide price range in Japan. It is easy to find anything on both ends of the spectrum. On the other hand travelling can take a great toll on expenses especially with longer distances. As a result expenditures usually surges on the weekends due to transportation and entrance fees. However, the total expenditure could be controlled easily to fit ones lifestyle.

Meaning of Japan Internship

This internship is a very meaningful experience in different ways. First it is an opportunity to experience a different work culture. Working in Asia is one of my considerations after graduation. Being able to immerse in the environment helps in making this career decision. Even working in North America, many firms and research labs have intimate involvement with Asia. Having this Japan internship experience opens up more opportunities to get involved in dealing with the Asia sector.

From the perspective of travelling, there are many exciting places I have not yet visited in Japan. I would definitely like to return as a tourist in the future to explore further. The three months stay gives me a good idea of planning my own trips in Japan. In my opinion, self-planned trips are more enjoyable and allows for in-depth exploration of culture and place.

Furthermore, the internship was a great networking opportunity. During the internship period, many new contacts were established. These include Toshiba employees, Toshiba interns and also over twenty Canada Coop Japan interns. Travelling together further enhances the bond between everyone. Most of the people I met in Japan are in engineering related fields. The contacts are all valuable for either professional or future travelling purposes.



Figure 5 – Group photo with CJP members at Kyoto station



Figure 6 – Group photo with CJP at Nara

Lastly, living independently in a foreign country has its ups and downs. Besides being exciting, there are also many challenges. Facing these challenges alone, I became more confident in independent problem solving. In the long run, this confidence is invaluable to both work and life outside of work.

Conclusion

This internship has proved to be a very fruitful experience both in terms of work experience and cultural experience. Throughout my stay in Japan I received a lot of help from supervisor, co-workers and Toshiba internship coordinator. From travelling in Japan I also made many friends from different parts of the world. I am truly grateful to have received such a diverse experience. The three months stay was spectacular and

relatively short. In the future I look forward to returning to Japan again to explore its rich culture and attractions.