

David Willoughby

Age: 36

Nationality: British

Lives in: Tokyo, Japan

Languages: English and Japanese

Education: Journalism, University of Sunderland;
Modern English Language, University of Nottingham



Where have you lived, and what were your previous roles?

I grew up in the UK and, following a brief career in music journalism, I moved to Japan in my early twenties. My first assignment was as an English teacher at island schools around the Seto Inland Sea. I experienced first-hand the good-natured spirit of ordinary Japanese folk, a point that's sometimes lost on people who move only in Tokyo expat circles.

For the last seven years I've used my cultural knowledge to help British universities recruit students in Japan. There's a huge amount of localization work involved: websites, print ads, everything has to be redone for the local market. But there's also an unbelievable amount of paperwork and attention paid to clients' needs. Japanese consumers are the most fastidious in the world and don't like to leave anything to chance. The good news is that if you have a desirable brand—like the UK's education sector—then consumers here will gravitate towards it.

What do you enjoy most about your role?

I love helping clients win a presence in the daily lives of their audience with fantastic free content. The age of advertising is over and consumers demand to be educated, not sold to. Superstar brands are the ones that customers welcome into their lives, not the ones that make a forced entry.

At my last company we worked hard to tell stories that would inspire people in Japan to study abroad. That meant tracking down Japanese students in the UK (not always easy!) and persuading them to blog for us even while enrolled in a demanding university course. We didn't dictate the contents or edit out anything negative. We just focused on letting people tell their story, confident that the life-changing effects of studying abroad would be understood by the audience in Japan.

What challenges have you faced?

One of the core issues when marketing international education is how much to translate into the local language. Do we really need to translate everything into Japanese, even when the final product is delivered in English?

People who know Japan tend to say Yes we do. There's a strong argument that Japanese consumers will only make purchase decisions once all of their concerns have been addressed in Japanese. As a copywriter, can you really be sure that your carefully-crafted message is getting through to an audience which may struggle with basic comprehension? Hence there's huge demand for marketing-savvy translators capable of moving the audience towards the desired response.

Another challenge is how to get the best out of virtual creative teams. The image of a gathering of creatives sat around the same table or whiteboard is the ideal. But the reality of most international marketing projects is that you have a web developer in the Middle East and a designer who's traveling through Asia, and you have to figure out how to coordinate their efforts in order to promote an event that happens less than a month from now. Fortunately technology is keeping pace and there are a wide range of online tools that can help with this.

What is the attraction of working for Gengo?

One thing that is consistent throughout my career is that I've always used language to connect people with the very best education, ideas, and technology. Gengo is making the world smaller by lowering the cost of translation, bringing down the barriers that lock people into their own linguistic groups and promoting the global spread of knowledge, ideas, and commerce.

How would you describe living and working in Tokyo?

Tokyo is a giant, pulsating energy-ball of a city that also boasts a thousand tranquil islands where you can recover your senses over a cold dry beer or under a waving branch of cherry blossom.

What do you do in your spare time?

The rise of online learning platforms has made it easy to pick up new skills and knowledge at your own pace. I set three-month study schedules where I commit to learning something completely new. This year I've already covered responsive design, crisis communications and big data. It's great that people are no longer confined to the learning opportunities offered by their current employer or chosen career path.

<http://about.me/david.willoughby>