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Yogo Game: Strategy in the United States

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It was the spring of 2016. Hiro Keigo, president and chief executive officer of Yogo Game America, sighed and shook his head as he ended his video chat with Yogo Game, Inc.’s executives back at the company’s headquarters in Nagoya, Japan. “We have a lot of important decisions to make here in Menlo Park,” Keigo muttered aloud to an empty conference room. During the video chat, he and the other executives had discussed the need for Yogo Game to expand its U.S. operations. The expansion included hiring many new employees. Management in Nagoya made it very clear that Keigo was to implement the expansion without compromising cost efficiency and profitability. However, Keigo was conflicted. He knew that as a Japanese company doing business in the United States, Yogo Game faced distinct challenges in terms of personnel and company culture. Should Keigo hire locally, or bring in employees from Japan? Thoughts about the costs and benefits of pursuing each option swirled in his head as he got out of his chair and left the conference room. When Keigo got back to his office, he scheduled a meeting with Yogo Game America’s management team. Keigo knew that the hiring decisions the team was going to make would greatly impact the company’s success.

COMPANY BACKGROUND

Yogo Game, Inc.

In 2002, Kenzo Makoto and two associates launched a self-developed advertisement product called “Yogoclick.” They could not have imagined then that this creation would make the company, Yogo Game, Inc., a household name in the Japanese Internet industry. Headquartered in Nagoya, this young company experienced initial success when it was awarded Venture of the Year in 2003.

Yogo Game carried this momentum into early 2004, entering the Tokyo Stock Exchange. Unfortunately, the remainder of 2004 was a difficult time for the entire industry as a result of the dotcom crash. Yet under Mokoto’s careful guidance, the company displayed toughness and resiliency, diversifying and expanding over the next four years. Yogo Game went on to establish its presence in various Internet fields with new subsidiaries, such as Mobile Cal, Novo EC, and Search Cal.

By 2008, Yogo Game had fully recovered from any fallout effects of the dotcom crash, recording profits for the first time since its listing on the stock exchange. In the same year, Yogo Game launched Zemba, a blog service with enough potential and profitability to become the company’s core business just one year later. As Zemba gained popularity, Yogo Game’s other divisions also experienced substantial growth. Yogo Game had achieved a great deal in just 14 years. The firm’s overall operating profit had grown more than 48 per cent, and by then, the company employed over 2,000 people across subsidiaries in major cities within the United States, China, and Vietnam. With a mission of “becoming a . . . hallmark of the 21st century,” the future looked bright for Yogo Game. Management set out to increase the company’s influence even further by exploring untapped areas of the Internet industry.

Yogo Game America

Yogo Game America was established in Menlo Park, California in 2012, and was a wholly owned subsidiary of Yogo Game. The main purpose of this subsidiary, led by Keigo, was to introduce and deliver the same successful online service and entertainment experience from Japan to a new American audience.

Unlike Yogo Game, which was heavily involved in four primary business sectors, Yogo Game America focused on only one particular aspect of the Internet industry: social game development and online entertainment communities. As a part of the corporation’s plan to seek innovation, Yogo Game America was positioned to explore and compete in online gaming and entertainment for the emerging smartphone and tablet market. Yogo Game America was quickly becoming a leading application developer for a few Silicon Valley social media companies.

Whether Yogo Game America could take its success to the next level would depend on the quality of the company’s leadership and its ability to adjust management practices to the U.S. market—a foreign market for Yogo Game. The company wanted to balance Japanese and American cultures to maintain Japanese group productivity and American individual creativity (see Exhibit 1). The volatile nature of the online gaming and entertainment industry and its placement within a highly competitive environment compounded Yogo Game America’s challenge.

PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

When Makoto started Yogo Game, he envisioned centring his business on the ever-growing Internet industry. Staying true to his vision, Makoto built a company that influenced its consumers by being an active participant in all Internet-related activities. There were four primary sections that made up the Yogo Game business domain: blogging and virtual communities, Internet media, Internet advertising, and venture capital investment development.

Zemba: Blogging and Virtual Communities

Zemba was Yogo Game’s core business outlet. It started in 2008, primarily as a communication and social networking platform. As the service gained increasing popularity over the years, it evolved to offer two main services: blogging and a virtual community. In 2010, Zemba was awarded first place in the blog service category of Web of the Year.[[1]](#footnote-1) By 2012, Zemba had become Japan’s overall leader in blog services. Just eight years after its implementation, Zemba had over 20 million registered users worldwide, and was generating a considerable portion of the company’s profits. Most recently, Zemba launched a micro-blogging platform—Zemba Now—which was positioned to rival Twitter.

In February 2012, Zemba launched Zemba Pegg, an avatar-based community service that offered members the opportunity to actively partake in a virtual world. Users were encouraged to first create characters known as “peggs” with multiple attribute selections such as facial features, clothing, and accessories. Participants could then choose to purchase furniture to decorate their own rooms, buy clothes and accessories to expand their wardrobe, and chat with other peggs in various virtual locations and time periods. Mini-games available within the online community further promoted user interaction. As of spring 2012, Zemba Pegg was the leading virtual-world service provider in Japan, and was so popular that the company launched an American version, known as Zemba Peco.

Internet Media

This business sector mainly consisted of social games and applications for personal computing and smartphone platforms. Yogo Game became Japan’s number one social applications provider, with over 30 social applications developed by Yogo Game for both Japanese and American markets. These applications offered a variety of functions, such as information services, product price comparisons, and purchase-point reward systems. Social games advanced the company’s profile further. A key function of Yogo Game America was to develop social gaming for U.S. iPhone and iPad users.

Internet Advertising

Considered by many to be a pioneer in the Internet industry, Yogo Game pushed its Internet services to develop a portfolio of online advertising technologies. The company’s advertising billings were the highest in Japan, and its services earned the highest rating (four stars) in an agency ranking system. Some marketing and advertising firms focused on just one or two specific areas of online advertising, but Yogo Game provided a variety of solutions, including campaign planners, advertisement development and publishing, operations, and real-time analytics. Yogo Game also employed traditional Internet marketing methods, such as banner ads, social media, and search engine optimization, for both online and mobile companies. A team of professional technical staff supported those using paid search advertisement.

Venture Capital Investment

With the goal of enhancing the general development of Internet business and financing, Yogo Game’s ventures division focused on developing firms within the Internet industry, especially start-up companies. Yogo Game provided support and the funding needed for start-up companies to develop and prosper; this strengthened the services provided within the overall network and improved the entire online ecosystem. Ranked as the top corporate venture capital firm in Japan, Yogo Game managed about US$90 million[[2]](#footnote-2) in assets with over 79 portfolios spread across Japan, China, and Vietnam.

INDUSTRY AND COMPETITION

Social gaming and online communities developed as a viable industry with the proliferation and widespread use of social media and the entry of smartphones into the mainstream mobile device market. While the category of social games was broad and encompassed a variety of products, the key features of these games were that they were web based and often involved, or had the capacity to involve, people in a user’s online social network.

The business models varied among social gaming companies, but many games were offered for free or at a nominal price. Companies tended to generate revenue through a variety of other mechanisms, including sales of virtual goods within the games, paid advertisements, or subscriptions to premium versions of the games.[[3]](#footnote-3) The market was expected to bring in over $5.5 billion in revenue in 2015, more than double its revenue in 2011 (see Exhibit 2).[[4]](#footnote-4)

There had been a push in the industry to determine who social gamers were so key players in the industry would better understand “how to best reach, engage, and influence” this audience.[[5]](#footnote-5) According to a 2011 study conducted by Kabam Social Gaming, 41 per cent of U.S. Internet users played social games.[[6]](#footnote-6) This amounted to approximately 100 million individual users—a figure that was expected to rapidly increase over the next few years (see Exhibit 3).[[7]](#footnote-7) The average user was 40.9 years old, with female social gamers outnumbering their male counterparts.[[8]](#footnote-8) Social gamers could be categorized into four groups: affluent players, who purchased in-game currency to advance; competitive players, who played to win and boast about their achievements; beginner players, who were less technically proficient and preferred free content; and devotees, who comfortably used advanced functions but also preferred free play.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Statistics from 2016 indicated that the social gaming industry in the United States consisted of 7,644 companies, employing 13,839 individuals.[[10]](#footnote-10) Even though there were clearly many firms in the business of social gaming, there was still incentive to enter the industry, with its low barriers to entry and high potential for profit.[[11]](#footnote-11) As in other industries, the landscape of social gaming was shaped by the major players who had a majority of the market share, including Zynga Inc., Electronic Arts Inc., and the Walt Disney Company. The industry leaders bolstered their companies by acquiring smaller competitors. Zynga notably acquired Newtoy, Inc., the developer of the popular Words with Friends game.[[12]](#footnote-12) Similarly, in order to bolster their positions in the burgeoning social gaming industry, Electronic Arts purchased Playfish,[[13]](#footnote-13) and Disney bought Playdom,[[14]](#footnote-14) in acquisitions worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

In addition to these industry giants, Yogo Game competed more directly with GREE, Inc. and DeNA Co., Ltd., both of which were based in Japan and had also recently opened U.S. subsidiaries. All of Yogo Game’s competitors had headquarters in California’s San Francisco Bay Area, except Disney, which was based in Southern California. Given that the major industry players were U.S.-based companies, they conformed to U.S. standards for compensation, bonus structures, and work culture.

NORTH AMERICAN OPERATIONS

Strategy

As a relatively new industry, the social gaming market had grown at an exponential pace since the introduction of the smartphone. In order to maintain its own steady rate of expansion, Yogo Game decided to establish Yogo Game America as the forefront of the company’s global development strategy. Yogo Game America’s launch was deliberate and well planned, motivated by several strategic considerations.

First, Menlo Park provided the perfect setting to establish operations for any gaming-related company. Menlo Park was in the heart of Silicon Valley, famous for housing the corporate titans of the gaming industry. While well-known companies such as Sony Corporation, Nintendo Co. Ltd., and Electronic Arts were located in surrounding cities, Menlo Park itself was home to fresh heavy hitters such as Zynga and GREE. From a geographic standpoint alone, Menlo Park had become the mecca of the electronic entertainment industry for all gaming-related organizations on the West Coast.

Second, when comparing Japanese and U.S. social gaming markets, it was obvious that the United States not only had more potential, but also more resources. There were nearly three times more people living in the United States than in Japan, which directly translated into a larger market potential for Yogo Game. In addition, while Japanese firms had always been considered the pioneers of the video and electronic gaming industry, the United States had become a leader of that business worldwide over the previous few decades. Such rapid growth and development required an abundance of resources, including funding, skilled personnel, and technology.

Lastly, Yogo Game America was established for competitiveness. Despite all of Yogo Game’s successes, the company wanted to avoid complacency and remain competitive; therefore, Yogo Game America was launched to keep pace with Yogo Game’s aggressive industry rivals. Because top gaming companies such as GREE and DeNA had already implemented their expansion plans into North America, and U.S.-based Zynga, Electronic Arts, and Disney already exerted substantial influence over the U.S. market share, Yogo Game had to act quickly, yet strategically, to compete.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Workplace Culture

Yogo Game America’s workforce was currently 35 per cent American, but Keigo would have liked more American influence in the company; he thought this could be achieved by rapidly expanding the workforce, and ideally, hiring locally. After much thought and discussion with management, Keigo’s target was to have 70 per cent American employees by the end of 2017. Keigo intended to have 120 employees, which was almost three times the number of employees currently working at Yogo Game America.

While tripling the workforce seemed extreme, part of the hiring necessity stemmed from the extent to which American engineers specialized in their field. Because American engineers were so specialized in the type of work they did, four American engineers had to be hired to do the job that one Japanese engineer could. Yogo Game also wanted to have American management at Yogo Game America because Americans were familiar with the U.S. business climate. Americans also had more insight to, and experience in running, a successful social media company in the United States.

New employees to Yogo Game America took part in an offsite training program that introduced new employees to the industry, headquarters, and current trends. The training lasted for one week, after which the new employees joined their teams. There was no cultural component to the training.

Yogo Game America believed it operated in a way that reflected American culture and attitudes. For example, in Japan, an employee would traditionally be promoted based on the number of years the employee had served the company. While some companies in Japan still adhered to this practice, others (particularly high-tech and social media companies) believed the practice caused inefficiency in the workplace. They adopted a Western management style, which was the style endorsed at Yogo Game America.

There were, however, several Japanese values retained at the company. For example, the office floor plan was open, with ample communal space for meetings and conferences. In addition, even the office space was open. Instead of closed-off rooms or cubicles, which were frequently seen in U.S. office spaces, Yogo Game America had one big room with large tables at which employees sat together; this was meant to foster collaboration and discussion in the workplace. Yogo Game America also held daily morning meetings, as were traditional in Japan.

In anticipation of hiring additional American workers, the company needed to make a choice about its workplace culture. The decisions Yogo Game would make about employee performance review, salary increases, and bonus structures would all influence the culture at Menlo Park. Yogo Game America’s success would depend on the choices management made with respect to American and Japanese cultural differences in the workplace. The American culture focused on rewarding individual performance, whereas the Japanese culture focused on rewarding group performance (see Exhibit 1). Each approach had its merits and downsides. For instance, overemphasis on individual performance could lead to unnecessary competition and friction among the team members, whereas overemphasis on group performance could discourage individual initiatives and creativity.

Employment Challenges in A HIgh-Tech INDUSTRY

The key to success in any knowledge-based industry was undoubtedly human capital, or talent. There was plenty of that in Silicon Valley, where Yogo Game chose to build its U.S. subsidiary.

Flexible Work Arrangements

Silicon Valley, located in Northern California, was the epicentre of the global high-tech industry. It was synonymous with the world’s largest high-tech corporations, including Google (Alphabet Inc.), Apple Inc., Facebook, Inc., HP Inc. (the Hewlett-Packard Company), and Cisco Systems, Inc. Employment in Silicon Valley was characterized by high levels of mobility and rapid turnover. Employment in temporary agencies was three times the national average, with up to 40 per cent of the area’s workforce in non-standard working arrangements.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Many employees in high-tech industries, especially those with the right networks and skills, thrived in this kind of volatile labour market. However, as a Japanese company, Yogo Game experienced cultural shock. In Japan, once a person was employed, the person was considered to be employed for a working lifetime. Japanese multinational corporations tended to employ more Japanese than local staff. (In 2012, 75 per cent of Yogo Game America’s staff were Japanese.) They paid the national wage standards and were careful not to poach employees from other companies. In contrast, American multinationals provided financial incentives higher than the average competitive wage in order to attract the best possible candidates for the right job, expecting that the practice would pay off their capital investment with higher profits.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Dynamic Labour Pool

High-tech industries were subject to high growth, creating high demand within short periods for certain types of engineers and specialized technical employees. Whether Silicon Valley could evolve rapidly depended on the ability of the labour force to quickly upgrade its skills and competencies to meet new demands. To keep pace, employers recruited new talent from American universities and colleges, especially those in the Bay Area, and also recruited skilled immigrants, who had already been contributing to Silicon Valley’s growth. There were yet more qualified scientists and engineers internationally who could satisfy the demands of the U.S. high-tech industry. Yet immigration policies in the United States had been affected by the country’s homeland security policies, making it more difficult for foreigners to get a working visa for the United States.[[18]](#footnote-18)

The United States and Japan were two of the world’s leading nations in computer engineering practice and education; however, their systems for educating and training were markedly different as a result of different cultural and economic environments. With explosive growth in foreign direct investment, global corporate alliances in engineering and technology, and the development of software and applications that could operate on multiple computing platforms, smooth collaboration was needed among technical personnel based in two or more countries. Yogo Game America’s success depended on the performance of its engineers, who worked in an international setting with diverse cultural teams. Nakada Sakurai, Yogo Game America’s executive vice-president, explained the challenge:

This is a problem that we are currently facing. Our Japanese engineers cannot clearly communicate with our American engineers because neither of the two speaks the other’s language. As a result, we end up with miscommunication or wasted time since a bilingual employee needs to be the translator in order for the two engineering groups to get the job done.

Yogo Game America’s Challenge

Yogo Game America’s dilemma was one of the most persistent challenges for multinational corporations: should the company align the culture of management practices with the location, export the culture of the parent firm to the out-of-country subsidiary, or merge the two cultures? Should Yogo Game America behave and act as local firms in the United States (localization/adaptation), or adopt, to a lesser or greater degree, the practices of the parent company in Japan (standardization)?

Japanese society was hierarchical. People were conscious of their position in the hierarchy and acted accordingly in any social setting. In business, foreigners experienced Japanese companies as extremely hierarchical because decisions would have to be confirmed by each layer of the business hierarchy, then finally by top management.[[19]](#footnote-19) This painstakingly slow decision-making process was amplified by a collective decision-making process at the top management level; there was no single top person to make decisions. Even though Japan was a meritocratic society—all citizens were born equal and could become anything if they worked hard enough—group harmony and loyalty were prioritized above any individual interests or needs. Japanese people valued dignity and respect; losing face was to be avoided at all costs. Thus, they would extend themselves to be polite and accommodating, and avoid disputes, conflicts, and embarrassment.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Japan was also a society driven by competition, achievement, and success. Yet because of the societal preference for collectivism, competitive and assertive behaviours were seen between groups rather than between individuals. In corporate Japan, employees were motivated when they were working on a winning team, succeeding against their competition. They thrived for perfection and excellence, achieving it through long and hard working hours. For this reason, Japanese employees spent a lot of time and effort identifying risks and doing feasibility studies; they took into account detailed figures and facts, then made their decisions. The need to avoid uncertainty meant that change was difficult to achieve in Japanese companies.[[21]](#footnote-21) However, the long-term orientation of Japanese companies was focused on the triple bottom line—environment, society, and financial gain—unlike most U.S. companies, which focused only on maximizing their shareholders’ wealth.

Keigo was thinking about the upcoming management meeting at Yogo Game America. The company needed to expand, but how would it resolve the cultural differences between Japanese and American employees, and between Japanese and American management styles, in order to succeed in the quickly growing social gaming industry? Would Yogo Game America need to choose one culture over the other, and if so, which culture would it choose, and to what extent? Was it possible to create an environment that integrated both cultures? Would the choices alienate some employees, increasing the odds that Yogo Game America would have to deal with high employee turnover in an already shifting employment landscape?

Exhibit 1: Comparing American and Japanese Cultures

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **American Culture** | **Japanese Culture** |
| Status and relationships are not very important; status is based on what you can do, not who you are. | Status relationships are very important (e.g., older, larger, and more prestigious entities have more power). |
| Focus is short term and on the business contract (not the relationship). | Focus is long term and on the relationship (not the business contract). |
| Getting business deals done is more important than maintaining harmony. | Maintaining harmony is more important than getting deals done. |
| Reward individuals to stimulate productivity. | Reward groups to maintain group harmony. |
| Decision making is individualistic. | Decision making is by consensus. |
| Do not accept “no” for an answer. (There is always a way.) | Do not say “no”; saving face is important for maintaining harmony. |
| Deal with issues sequentially. | Deal with issues holistically. |

Source: Adapted from Veronica Wellein, *Cross-Cultural Differences: American, German, Japanese and Chinese Negotiation Styles* (Hamburg: Diplomica Verlag GmbH, 2008); John Graham and Yoshihiro Sano, *Smart Bargaining: Doing Business with the Japanese*, revised ed. (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1991).

EXHIBIT 2: Yogo Game, INc., Internet Advertising Sales by Quarter, 2007–2010

(in JP¥ Million)

Source: Company records.

EXHIBIT 3: Yogo Game, Inc., Net Sales versus Operating Income, 2009–2011

(in JP¥ Million)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Year** | **Net Sales** | **Operating Income** |
| 2009 | 93,797 | 4,423 |
| 2010 | 95,650 | 9,237 |
| 2011 | 118,578 | 14,249 |

Source: Company records.

1. Web of the Year awarded the best websites in several categories, selecting from nominated websites that serviced Japan. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. All currency amounts are in US$ unless otherwise specified. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
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10. “Social Network Game Development: Market Research Report,” IBIS World, July 2016, www.ibisworld.com/industry/social-network-game-development.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
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16. Chris Benner, “Shock Absorbers in the Flexible Economy: The Rise of Contingent Employment in Silicon Valley,” Working Partnerships USA, accessed March 24, 2017, https://wpusa.org/Publication/wpusa\_shock.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
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21. “Japan,” Geert Hofstede, accessed March 24, 2016, http://geert-hofstede.com/japan.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)