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### Japanese Americans explore the power of ethnic networks in Silicon Valley

[Edward Iwata](#) | February 27th, 2009

Ethnic networking is big in Silicon Valley. Indian professionals have [The Indus Entrepreneurs](#) (TIE); and the Chinese and Taiwanese have their pick of the [Hua Yuan Science and Technology Association](#) (HYSTA), the [Asian America Multi-Technology Association](#) (AAMA) and the [Monte Jade Science & Technology Association](#).

Now there's the N! Leadership Network, a new group for Japanese Americans and Japanese nationals to connect in the business world. Recently founded by Michael Kanazawa, chief executive of consultancy [Dissero Partners](#), the organization aims to boost the number of Japanese Americans in professional leadership roles.

Kanazawa (right) says he hopes to expand N!'s circle of 50 members beyond California to create a prestigious business network, and perhaps even influence U.S.-Japan business ties. "Our intent is not to create a large-scale networking group," he says, "but rather a deeply connected group of people who have quality interactions."

Kanazawa says there is "a real shift in the profile of Japanese American leaders who are building leading companies and serving as role models for leadership." He cites Ko Nishimura, who built electronics manufacturer Solectron from a \$90 million company into a \$19 billion company in a decade before it was purchased by Flextronics, and former [Lockheed Martin](#) president Sam Araki. In the military realm, U.S. Army Gen. [Eric Shinseki](#) has



represented well, showing “strength of conviction in the face of significant pressure,” he says.

At a gathering Thursday night at [Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati](#), N! members hailing from tech corporations, startups, law firms and consultancies ate sushi and listened to Japanese American CEOs talk about their careers and management styles. Most said their cultural values regularly influence their decision-making in subtle ways.

Ryo Koyama, (right) chief executive of remote software startup [Yoics](#), immigrated to California from Japan when he was just three years old. His father, a technologist at Sun Microsystems and [Raytheon](#), and his mother, who came from a Japanese political family, raised him in a traditional fashion.



In the rapid-fire tech world, where outspoken and risk-taking executives are admired, Koyama said that he never aspired to be a “crazy CEO,” for fear of embarrassing his family. “As a Silicon Valley CEO, you want to be a rock star,” he said, “but at the end of the day, that’s not what it’s really about.”

Recognizing the obstacles that stand between many of his peers and success in this environment, Koyama explained that “a Japanese upbringing is diametrically opposed to being an entrepreneur. Japanese culture is about fitting in.” By contrast, a hard-charging entrepreneur must break from the pack, take a good look at himself and “do things differently,” he said.

Lance Tokuda (right), co-founder and chief executive of widget company [RockYou](#) is a Hawaii native who said he was shocked when he moved to mostly-white Colorado to start his career. “I thought, ‘Where are all the Japanese people?’” he told the audience.



Tokuda said that “the whole idea of being a CEO freaks my mother out... She’s always worried about the company.” But his early success and generous salary have helped alleviate her fears. “It’s all about succeeding and taking chances,” he said.

Tokuda added that his Japanese background didn’t hurt him in dealing with [SoftBank](#) founder Masayoshi Son. “He said I’m Japanese, you’re Japanese, we have to make a deal,” Tokuda said. Last year, SoftBank and [SK Telecom Ventures](#) announced a \$17 million investment in RockYou.

Jeff Maruyama, chief executive of the [i-Hire](#) recruiting firm, said that his father and Japanese relatives taught him the value of genuinely respecting his employees, even when they make mistakes. He is also acutely aware that every decision he makes affects the well-being and livelihoods of workers and their families. “I want a corporate culture where we treat others the way we want to be treated,” said Maruyama, whose firm consults for AT&T, Apple and others.

Despite the lessons and connections their shared heritage has afforded N!’s members, Kanazawa says the association’s goals fit into a broader strategy. As more companies scale globally, and risks and rewards grow accordingly, “knowing how to relate and work with multiple cultures will be a tremendous asset,” he says. By giving the Japanese and Japanese American business community a solid foundation, the idea is the network will open doors to cross-cultural partnerships as well.

*Ed Iwata is a former USA Today staff writer who covered venture capital, business diversity, white collar crime and other topics. He is now authoring a book called [Fusion Leaders](#) (Jossey-Bass/Wiley, 2010) and he writes the blog, [Cool Global Biz](#), on businesses, globalization and diversity.*