

Panasonic recognition of same-sex marriage an isolated move

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The Associated Press

TOKYO — For decades, Panasonic Corp. has shaped Japanese corporate tradition — be it morning exercise routines or lifetime employment. But don't hold your breath waiting for other Asian businesses to emulate its latest policy announcement: Recognizing same-sex partnerships.

Much of Asia remains far behind the west in such attitudes. Panasonic's move is rare, although bold, and seems unlikely to herald a sea change.

In China, South Korea, the Philippines, and much of the rest of Asia, "coming out of the closet" still has enormous consequences, not just for the individual but also for family members who might become targets of abuse and ostracism. It's an act requiring tremendous courage in Asian cultures that value conformity, traditional family structures, and harmony.

Even the way Panasonic responded to media queries about its decision was telling. It said it had considered the move for more than a decade, but offered no details. The maker of the Viera TV and Lumix camera appeared overwhelmed by the outpouring of interest, mostly from western media, and said it could not provide interviews on the issue.

Lenny Sanicola, an employee benefit expert at WorldatWork, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit, was surprised by Panasonic's low-key stance. A U.S. company pioneering such a move would be announcing its decision with fanfare and likely getting showered with praise, he said.

"Panasonic would be a pioneer in Japan," he said, noting that sending a message about valuing diversity would attract younger talent that is urgently needed in an aging society like Japan.

It's only a matter of time before



EQUALITY ACCEPTANCE. Koyuki Higashi, right, and her partner, Hiroko Masuhara, left, hold a banner reading, "Congratulations: The same-sex partnership ordinance," while speaking to the media in front of Shibuya ward office in Tokyo, in this March 31, 2015 file photo. Shibuya ward became the first locale in Japan to recognize same-sex partnerships as the "equivalent of a marriage." Panasonic Corp. has implemented a new policy: Recognizing same-sex partnerships — a move it said it has considered for more than a decade. (AP Photo/Yuri Kageyama)

Asian nations adopt what has become the dominant message in Europe and North America, Sanicola said.

"It's business as usual. We treat everyone the same," he said in a recent telephone interview.

Same-sex marriage is legal in the U.S. The Supreme Court ruled in 2015 that same-sex couples have the right to marry. In the U.S., employers are required to abide by federal regulations on retirement plans, health insurance, and other benefits for spouses already, and a review of company policies on the state level has begun.

"Recognition of changing social mores and a desire to enhance diversity appeal to prospective employees, as well as prospective customers," said Karen Cates, a professor at the Kellogg School of Management. "In short, it is good business."

Throughout Asia, same-sex marriages are not legal. A few local governments in Japan now recognize such partnerships as the equivalent of marriage. That includes Tokyo's Shibuya ward, a bastion of Japan's youth culture and its equivalent of the Silicon Valley. There are no legal

penalties for violations.

Japanese public sentiment is generally unsympathetic to LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) issues, and local media speculated that Panasonic merely made its same-sex marriage decision because it was an Olympic sponsor.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) opposes discrimination on the basis of race, gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation. But Emmanuelle Moreau, an IOC spokeswoman, denied it influences company policies, including Panasonic's.

Toyota Motor Corp. of Japan and Samsung Electronics Co. of South Korea have diversity policies. But Toyota said that doesn't extend to recognizing same-sex marriage, and it's not considering any change. Samsung said its policies are specific for country depending on local laws, including benefits.

Tomoshi Sakka, a lawyer who represents gender-related discrimination cases, said Panasonic's decision could serve as a precedent toward recognizing same-sex marriage in Japan — a demand he feels is sure

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APPLE PAY ACCEPTED. An employee works on a laptop computer while talking with a customer near a sheet showing accepted methods of payment, including Apple Pay, top left, at an Apple Store in Beijing. Apple Inc. has launched its smartphone-based payment system in China, where the electronic payments market is already dominated by an arm of e-commerce giant Alibaba. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)

Apple Pay launched in China where e-payments are widely used

BEIJING (AP) — Apple Inc. has launched its smartphone-based payment system in China, where the electronic payments market is already dominated by an arm of e-commerce giant Alibaba.

Apple said Apple Pay could be used with cards from 19 banks and "numerous merchants." The merchants include supermarket Carrefour, fast-food outlets McDonald's and KFC, and convenience store 7-Eleven, according to a news release from China UnionPay, the country's state-owned credit card processor with which Apple is working.

Apple's electronic payment system started in the United States in October 2014 and has since spread to Britain, Canada, and Australia. Hong Kong, Singapore, and Spain are coming this year.

Apple Pay is a late arrival in a Chinese electronic payments market that offers smartphone users not just online shopping but also the option to order taxis, send money to friends, pay bills, and invest in wealth management funds.

The market is dominated by Alipay, an arm of the e-commerce giant Alibaba Group. WeChat Payment, operated by social networking and gaming company Tencent Holdings Ltd., is also popular.

Apple's system will allow UnionPay cardholders to make payments at retail stores via Apple iPhones and Apple Watches. The service also enables in-app payments on iPhones and iPads.

Apple has declined to say how the company and UnionPay would divide the costs and revenues of their venture.

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