

Friends of Japan



Jovan Rebolledo

Born in Mexico, resident in Okinawa. A believer in predicting the future by making it. Serves on the advisory board for several start-ups, is involved in Exponential Japan, the XPrize Think Tank Tokyo, and SingularityU Tokyo, and is working on building a haptics company. Is currently contributing his expertise in exponential technologies to an OIST research group building innovative microbial fuel cells. Is excited to continue producing and promoting exponential innovation in Japan and beyond, to positively impact people globally.

Fostering Exponential Possibilities in Japan

Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology (OIST) researcher Jovan Rebolledo is optimistic he can help Japan be among the leaders of worldwide growth in exponential technologies. The Mexican-born computer science expert and entrepreneur says Japan already has many structural and organic elements in place to help shape this rapidly developing area that includes artificial intelligence, robotics, biotech, nanotech, and information systems and networks. “Japan produces amazing technology, especially in the field of robotics,” he says. “I expect it to continue as a leader in R&D and to expand its global reach in rolling out tech advances around the world.”

The Veracruz native first stepped into the tech world as a boy when his father brought a computer home one day. Smiling, he says that he was fascinated by the machine—a rare item where he grew up—and would spend hours on it. “It made me dream about technology.”

Rebolledo had been working at a start-up in Mexico when he decided to travel to Japan—a country he had been fascinated by since childhood—to study robotics on a Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) research program in 2002. Grinning, he explains he was most interested in “understanding the orderliness of the culture and the ways big companies produce high-quality products.” Having forged a strong connection to Japan, he came here again to undertake graduate studies on a Japanese government scholarship, earning his master’s and PhD in engineering and computer science from Kanazawa University.

A major turning point came in 2009 when he joined the inaugural Global Solutions Program (GSP) at the Silicon Valley-based think tank Singularity University (SU). The 10-week course opened his eyes to the importance of applying exponential technologies toward changing the world. “By thinking exponentially,” he stresses, “leaders and CEOs, even ordinary people, would use a new approach when attacking global-scale problems. For example, they might use AI to improve access to high-quality educational materials. A key characteristic of these solutions is that they can become globally scaled services or products, rather than a means to tackle problems just locally or linearly. In this way, through the exercise of thinking exponentially, we can create exponential innovation quickly.”

He has applied this approach in Japan since before joining OIST in 2015. Along with research, he is active in the Exponential Japan initiative and serves as a SingularityU community ambassador in Japan’s first SU chapter. As part of his efforts to promote bold thinking, he coaches a group of high school students in Okinawa in developing innovative uses for drones. He also teaches entrepreneurship at Keio University in Tokyo in a course that includes considerations for applying exponential technology. “It’s important to impress on young people that they can make amazing things by thinking exponentially.” He is also enlisting the support of innovation leaders at companies, educational institutions, and other organizations in Japan.

Rebolledo is optimistic that linking innovators in exponential technologies will push the world forward in what he describes as a “combined ripple effect.” He is currently working to build collaboration among innovators, starting in Mexico, Japan, and the United States—three countries he has strong ties to—and expanding throughout Latin America and beyond, bringing together the big, diverse opportunities available. One area he is focusing on is making Japanese companies more aware of the innovation happening in Latin America. A recent example of his efforts includes introducing a drone start-up in Mexico to IT companies and investors in Japan.

Rebolledo points out there are abundant opportunities for cooperation. “Regardless of the shape or size of the collaboration, I aim to act as a bridge to bring innovation to and from Japan.”