



Yasmine Djoudi and Thomas Pouplin

After graduating from Kedge Business School in Bordeaux, France, Djoudi and Pouplin co-founded ikkai in Fukuoka. They like traveling, going to the movies, and discovering restaurants.

Yasmine Djoudi (left) and Thomas Pouplin (right) at a startup hub located in a former public school.

Series: Friends of Japan

Fukuoka City Fostering Innovation with the Startup Visa Program

How did two French business graduates end up bringing much-needed disruption to Japan’s graduate recruitment sector? What lured them from New York to a coastal town in the west of Japan? At a startup hub located in a former public school, Thomas Pouplin and Yasmine Djoudi sit poised to explain it all: how Fukuoka City is helping them to help brighten the career prospects of Japan’s graduates, how they are capturing the imagination of blue-chip companies and how they think Fukuoka beats Tokyo hands-down for fledgling startups and livability.

“It all started when we were MBA students at Kedge Business School in Bordeaux,” says Pouplin. “As part of one of our exchange programs, we came to study at Fukuoka’s Seinan Gakuin University. We didn’t know anything about Fukuoka. To be honest, we really wanted to study in

Tokyo,” says Pouplin. But the pair soon warmed to the city. “Tokyo is a great place to visit, but Fukuoka is the best place to live. People are very warm and friendly. We take a run through the park and finish on the beach. You can’t really do that in Tokyo,” he says. “There’s excellent *tonkotsu* ramen for just 280 yen (USD 2.62), and naturally the seafood is amazing too!” adds Djoudi.

To help fund their studies, the two looked for part time work in the city. “Finding a job was a pain. We had to post want ads on a noticeboard, and then wait,” says Pouplin. This inconvenience was part of their inspiration for “ikkai,” a website to provide Japan’s students with a hassle-free way to connect with those who need help with tasks ranging from graphic design and translation to dog-walking and handing out flyers.



The ikkai co-founders being interviewed. The pair have gained media attention both domestically and internationally.



Pouplin making a presentation at an event called “Sharing City Fukuoka 2016,” where he talked about the rewards of finding growth through sharing.

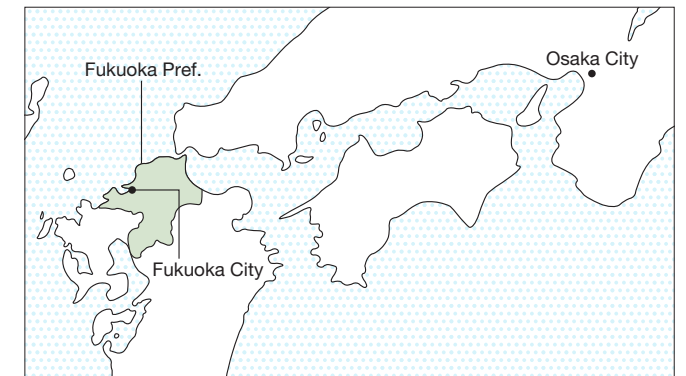


The team at work in ikkai’s office. Fukuoka’s affordable rent helped them to find a central location and the subsidy program helped to further lower their costs.

“We started working on this project in New York, while preparing to return to Japan. We chose Japan because at that time the startup scene was relatively underdeveloped, and we had Fukuoka in mind because we enjoyed our student days there so much,” says Pouplin. Also, there are a large number of universities in or near Fukuoka City, so this warm coastal city was perfect for them.

Their relocation was further hastened by being the first ever recipients of the new startup visa, which at the time was only offered in Fukuoka. “A mentor of ours in Tokyo had a contact who worked for Fukuoka City Council,” explains Djoudi. “She arranged for us to pitch to her colleagues. Their response was, ‘We have a new startup visa program. It would be perfect for your business plan. Would you like to be the first recipients?’ So of course, we said yes!” Fukuoka City’s startup visas include generous rent subsidies and free legal advice in English, which helped a lot during ikkai’s early stages. “The know-how and kindness of the staff really helped us accelerate our growth and jump through the right hoops,” says Pouplin.

Ikkai now has over 5,000 students and more than 200 client accounts. When Pouplin and Djoudi approached university staff in order to connect with students, ikkai was mainly a platform for recruiting people to complete one-off tasks, so they found it hard to convince university staff of the site’s value proposition. But after adding internship programs and vacancies suitable for graduates to the services offered by their platform, they soon won over university faculties, thus further accelerating their expansion.



Ikkai’s next mission was staff retention, specifically the retention of graduates hired straight from university by large companies. Around 30% of these graduates leave their first job within three years, which is very costly to both employers and employees alike. Djoudi and Pouplin decided this was a challenge they’d like to take on. To help fix this high rate of staff turnover, ikkai aims to help graduates find jobs that better match their characters by leveraging the data accumulated while matching students with one-off tasks, part-time jobs and internships.

With ikkai now progressing smoothly, Djoudi and Pouplin have branched out by co-founding another company, Spear Consulting. “The startup visa is fantastic. Over 30 people have received one in Fukuoka City in the last two years. We want to help more foreign startups to settle more smoothly and enjoy living in this amazing city as much as we do,” explains Pouplin.

About Japan’s Startup Visa Program

As one of the National Strategic Special Zone Initiatives, the program permits foreign entrepreneurs to receive a six-month “Business Manager” visa without fulfilling the usual prerequisites. Fukuoka City became the first area to start accepting startup visa applications in December 2015. In order to make Japan a more accommodating environment for startups, a new nationwide one-year startup visa program is expected to be rolled out in FY2018.