

Rakuten to hold all formal internal meetings in English

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Staff writer

Internet shopping mall operator Rakuten Inc. is in the process of making all formal internal meetings spoken in English to boost overseas sales, a company spokesman said Monday, elaborating on President Hiroshi Mikitani's remarks during an earnings announcement last week.

Corporate officer meetings and board meetings have been conducted in English since January, and all-company meetings every Monday have been in English since March, Rakuten public relations chief Megumu Tanefusa said. All formal meetings at department and section levels will gradually be switched to English, he added.

The company said it is increasing foreign employees, mainly Indians and Chinese. It will hire 100 foreigners fresh out of undergraduate and graduate schools, a sixth of all new hires, next year, he said. It hired 20 such foreigners this year.

"In order to globalize the company, everybody from top management to regular employees should be able to speak English," Tanefusa said.

Even if meeting participants are all Japanese, they will still have to speak English, he added.

The company has more than 300 non-Japanese employees in its group, including 200 in its New York subsidiary, he said.

Its entire workforce numbers 6,000.

Nissan Motor Co. and other companies that have been acquired by foreign companies have made English a common language, but it is rare for firms like Rakuten, whose management is dominated by Japanese, to make such a move. Rakuten has 16 board members, all Japanese.

Mikitani, who has a master's of business administration from Harvard University, said there have been no reported difficulties in communications so far.

Rakuten provides in-house English lessons for its employees. Tanefusa declined to say what TOEIC, or Test of English for International Communication, level the company aims its employees to achieve. English proficiency is necessary for promotion, he said.

Rakuten is trying to boost the proportion of overseas sales to about 50 percent of overall sales from an undisclosed current percentage, he said, without providing a time frame. It has established partnerships with companies in Taiwan, Thailand and China and will enter markets in seven new countries this year, he said.

The company said in January it has reached an agreement with China's top Internet search engine, Baidu Inc., to form a joint venture to launch an online mall in China in the second half of this year.

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