

Choosing Change: The Mindset Shaping Yanmar CE's Digital Future

4 months ago



Shigenobu Tanaka on curiosity, community, and building a culture ready for transformation.

Some transformations begin with technology, while others begin with a decision. For Shigenobu Tanaka, Head of Digital Transformation and IT Infrastructure at [Yanmar Compact Equipment](#) (Yanmar CE), that decision came after 35 years in international engineering, planning, and software development roles.

“I felt it was the right moment to change direction before turning 60,” he says with charismatic calm. “I wanted to take everything I’d learned in my career and use it in a new environment with fresh opportunities.”

His global career took him from early engineering roles in Japan, to two years in the United States supporting the service department within the sales office, and then to hands-on manufacturing assignments in the UK. He later transitioned into software, partner programs, and software product planning during a long tenure at Panasonic.

Across each chapter, he built a reputation for connecting people who thought differently. “I learned how important it is to stand between perspectives and help everyone understand one another,” he shares – an instinct that would later guide Yanmar CE’s digital evolution.

A fresh start with clear purpose

Tanaka joined Yanmar CE in 2020, beginning in the Quality Planning Group. The department was handling rising volumes of customer data, yet much of the work still relied on exporting information into spreadsheets and building documents manually. It was careful work, but time-consuming. And so, he

helped introduce Dr. Sum (a Japanese-developed database) and MotionBoard (a Japanese business-intelligence tool) – creating centralized dashboards that replaced days of preparation with minutes.

As data from across the organization came together, teams gained a clearer, real-time picture. “Data compilation is not a job that humans should do; making decisions is what humans should do,” he recalls hearing. It became the foundation for a new way of working.

The impact was immediate. Quality Assurance teams in Japan, Europe, and the United States were suddenly working in the same rhythm. “I wanted the platform to feel like ‘one Yanmar CE,’” he says. The early success soon inspired the creation of the Digital Transformation Department in 2022, which he was entrusted to lead.

People at the center of progress

Tanaka believed digital transformation should grow from the ground up. The approach became known internally as “grassroots DX” – a blend of mindset, culture, and community involvement. He launched internal working groups that encouraged shared learning, experimentation, and peer support. Today, more than 200 Yanmar CE employees participate in the digital community he helped build. “People’s mindsets have shifted in a remarkable way,” he says. “The community has played a major role in that change.”

His influence extends far beyond Yanmar. Tanaka leads the nest Kyushu/Okinawa and Manufacturing Data Utilization Working Groups – both part of a nationwide user community focused on strengthening how companies use their data and the tools that support it, including Dr. Sum and MotionBoard. He also contributes to UiPath’s global automation community, and has been recognised as a ‘Data Driven Meister’ – an honor awarded by WingArc1st Inc. to individuals who improve data-driven practices and digital transformation, “bringing smiles to the world through data utilization.”

These exchanges keep him connected to global trends and broaden his thinking. “Connecting with people across organisations brings new ideas and the kind of support only peers can offer,” he says. “That connection is powerful.”

Exploring AI with balance and clarity

Generative AI has become a new dimension of Yanmar CE’s digital journey. For Tanaka, the aim is faster, more informed decision-making rather than automation for its own sake. He anchors AI within the Yanmar Group’s “feedback loop” – gathering data, making decisions, taking action, and reviewing issues to accelerate improvement. But he is pragmatic about its limits. “Generative AI is not omnipotent,” he says. “It’s like a new employee – you guide it and help it improve.”

He often reminds colleagues that AI should be adopted even if its accuracy sits at 50 percent; progress comes from refining it through use. “AI supports the work, but people provide the judgment.” Examples within Yanmar CE are already emerging. Human Resources is piloting a natural-language search tool that lets employees ask policy questions and receive the relevant section instantly, rather than scrolling through long PDF documents. Elsewhere, workflows built on Dr. Sum and MotionBoard are digitising back-office tasks such as invoice matching, turning manual checks into quick comparisons and smoothing approval processes.

Faster insight, stronger outcomes

For customers, the effect is felt in clearer decisions and a faster response cycle. With earlier insight comes earlier action – issues are resolved before they escalate, strengthening machine reliability and improving the overall customer experience.

Tanaka also sees these shifts reflected across the global industry. Europe and the United States are moving rapidly toward real-time data and AI-supported workflows, while other regions move at their own pace. Many manufacturers are embracing “citizen development,” giving employees the ability to build the tools they need themselves. “Technology evolves, but people carry the organization,” he says.

Shaping the industry’s future mindset

Tanaka’s outlook aligns with Yanmar Group’s Guidelines: question the familiar, stay open-minded, collaborate widely, and approach change without fear. He remains active in communities inside and outside Yanmar, valuing the exchange of ideas across generations. “Being part of the community has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my career,” he smiles.

He now hopes to support the next generation of digital leaders and help younger employees develop the confidence to shape Yanmar CE’s future. For someone who embraced reinvention at 57, this feels natural. “Organisations are living things,” he says. “They change with time.” For Tanaka, the journey of Digital Transformation is ongoing – shaped by curiosity, collective effort, and the willingness to choose change.