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In this Issue:

- *The economic, social, and demographic context for work-life issues in Japan*
- *The Japanese corporate culture*
- *Shaping the work-life agenda and national policy*
- *Work-life best practices and recommendations for future progress*

Authored by:

Scott North, Ph.D
Osaka University

Sponsored by:

Johnson & Johnson

Contributing Staff:

Jennifer Sabatini Fraone
Danielle Hartmann
Catherine Maillard

Executive Director:

Brad Harrington
Boston College Center for Work & Family

Work-Life in Japan: The Past is Prologue

Japan is 3rd in global GDP standing, with an economy worth an estimated $5 trillion in 2009 (CIA, 2010). Low birth rates and rapid population aging, however, are threatening Japanese affluence and forcing discussions of how to transform social norms, the gender division of labor, and government policies that currently limit individual ability to balance work and life. In 2008, the government of Japan launched a work-life balance campaign targeting these demographic, social and labor issues.

The Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW), which is responsible for formulating Japan's work-life policy, declared 2008 to be the "inaugural year" of work-life balance and a cabinet level office was established to promote new policies (MHLW, 2009a). This Executive Briefing will explore the social, cultural, legal, and economic forces at play in Japan's Work-Life Balance initiatives and consider what might be done to support change.

Socioeconomic Indicators in Japan	
Population	126,804,433
Infant Mortality	

I. LINGERING INFLUENCE OF THE PAST ON CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE WORK-LIFE BALANCE DEVELOPMENT

balance is not well known. A nationally representative MHLW survey (2009a) of working households found 40% of respondents hoping for shorter work hours and 60% hoping for more personal free time. Yet in smaller firms (less than 100 employees) only about 10% of workers knew of the term "work-life balance." In larger firms, those with some knowledge of the concept or its implications reached 30%.

Japanese husbands and wives generally expect to have separate, non-overlapping roles, limiting men's involvement in children's care or housework. Work-life balance is typed as a women's issue, making it difficult for men to consider asking for their legal right to take leave or even return home from work before children are asleep.

II. WORK-LIFE BALANCE AND JAPANESE CORPORATE CULTURAL PRACTICES

The notion "work-life balance" has attracted interest in the context of declining fertility and aging labor force worries (MHLW, 2009b). Yet, even as the decline in reproduction has become news, new production strategies and management styles are receiving even more attention. Japanese management employs images of company as "a community of people organized to secure their common livelihood" (Rohlen, 1974, 14).

The moral use of time

In Japan, time has long been considered a scarce, collective resource, to be allocated by the heads of families, villages, companies, or the nation for the benefit of the collectivity rather than a personal possession (Smith, 1986). Even in the 20th century, when industrial development and greater wealth enabled greater individual choice, time spent on anything but work suffered from an image problem (Linhart, 1998, 2).

Tokuhisa Tamao (1980, 129) summarized the work-leisure relationship from the start of the Meiji era (1868) to World War II as follows:

> Enjoyment for its own sake was frowned upon. This notion, together with the idea that any free time that came one's way should be used for work, was widely held throughout the country – a mode of thinking that continued, indeed, right up to the Second World War; so that the level of awareness of 'leisure' among the Japanese at large was extremely low, and people had little notion of any concept of life extending beyond the one of work.

During industrialization, this traditional attitude was a great advantage, not least because workers shared this orientation. Overtime lured workers, who never demanded shorter hours because doing so would impugn the moral foundation of worker-employer relations and betray commitments to fellow workers (Smith, 1986, 186). Postwar government promotion of individual leisure, especially since the 1980s, has seen some success (Leheny, 2003), but today's depressed economy is a powerful drag on liberalizing attitudes toward time use. Paid leave use peaked at roughly 60 percent in the 1980s. Today it is less than 50 percent (Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training, 2010).

Japanese work hours trends

The Japanese government has attempted to reduce work hours since the late 1980s to a target of 1800 hours per year by introducing the five-day week. Various time-use surveys reveal varying results. Monthly MHLW surveys show Japanese working hours declining to near the target of 1800 hours per year. This drop in working hours is the result of the increase in mostly female, part-time work.

In contrast, the Prime Minister's Office Annual Labor Force Survey show that working hours have declined, but still

Long work hours are the most obvious obstacle to Japanese work-life balance. Unpaid overtime, called "service overtime," is commonplace.

The Labor Standards Law mandates an 8-hour day and 40-hour week. Nevertheless, a clause permits overtime or holiday work as agreed to by the employer and the workers' union or their representative. It stipulates that overtime wages be paid.

The only workers not covered by these work hours provisions are "executives." In Japan, the difference between "executive" and "manager" is often ambiguous. Not receiving overtime pay became a badge of elevated status. Thus the custom of non-payment spread without resistance.

However, *karoshi* (death from overwork) as well as suicides and work-induced depression made workers sensitive about work hours. When workers sue to recover unpaid overtime wages, the workers usually win. Rank is a common point of contention, but employees with high-ranking titles often lack the authority or high salaries of true executives.

To avoid lawsuits about service overtime practices Nippon Keidanren, the employers' federation, proposed in 2006 that an exemption apply to "white collar workers earning more than 4 million yen [roughly $45,000] per year." That excluded 70% of Japan's white-collar workers from overtime pay.

Workers propose to reduce work hours and raise overtime wages. Although the social effects of raising the overtime rate would be positive, stimulating consump-

The "gender equal" workplace ironically lacks examples of how men can achieve balance or increase involvement with children. The 1990 collapse of the Bubble Economy and subsequent restructuring reinforced most men's commitment to their identities as workers. Continued tough economic times have prompted resurgence in the number of women who yearn to escape employment by becoming full-time "professional" housewives (Taga Futoshi, 2006, 144).

Despite the broken covenant of "lifetime employment" and growing disenchantment with corporate life, men's lives have remained unbalanced, tilted toward work. To the extent that it is balanced at all, Japanese work-life has been balanced on the backs of working women. Government attempts to legislate work-life norms appropriate for an advanced industrial nation wound up reinforcing the idea of work-life balance and leave-taking as feminine (See Table 1). Instead of leaving work early to participate at home, fathers put in more hours, many unpaid, and give up the paid leave they rightfully should take, all for the sake of holding on to regular, full-time employment, the durable sine qua non of legitimacy, social membership, and masculinity.

Table 1. Percent of Eligible Parents Taking Childcare Leave (1996-2008)

12 Priority Fields

1. Expand women's participation in policy decision-making processes.
2. Review social systems and practices and raise awareness from a gender-equal perspective.
3. Secure equal opportunities and treatment between men and women in the field of employment.
4. Establish gender equality for realizing dynamic rural areas.
5. Support the efforts of men and women to harmonize work with their family and community life.
6. Develop conditions that allow the elderly to live with peace of mind.
7. Eliminate all forms of violence against women.
8. Support lifelong health for women.
9. Promote gender equality in the media.
10. Enrich education and learning that promote gender equality and facilitate diversity of choice.
11. Contribute to the "Equality, Development and Peace" of the global community.
12. Promote gender equality in fields requiring new initiatives.

(Gender Equality Bureau, 2006, 17).

Work-Life Balance Charter

The Charter aims to help Japan erect a family-friendly future. The audience for the message and institutions for realizing its goals are in the formative stage.

The Work-Life Balance Charter (Government of Japan, 2008) calls for cooperative action based on shared recognition of the problems. "To enable various kinds of care and community participation, as well as to respect the needs of individuals for personal time to live healthy, happy lives, Japanese society must diversify its work options." The Charter enjoins each citizen to take positive steps toward achieving work-life balance.

The Charter's first lines illustrate the overall flavor: "Work supports life, providing joy and reasons to live. At the same time housework, childrearing, and neighborhood relations are also essential parts of life and it is because they are fulfilled that reasons for living and joy are increased."

The Charter identifies 3 problems arising between work and life:

1. Employment instability means people cannot be economically independent.
2. Overwhelmed by work, fatigue of brain and body are likely to lead to health problems.
3. Work is often not compatible with child or elder care, so people are troubled.

The background to these difficulties includes intensified global competition, economic stagnation, and change in structures of production. Amid low profits, companies are asked to think of the burdens associated with increasing

for maintaining a decent standard of living – the corporate culture of long hours, discrimination against lower

V. CONCLUSIONS

Japan's work-life balance efforts are just getting started and remain small in scale. Behind the Work-Life Balance Charter, new labor market structures are already rising, such as institutionalized expansion of irregular worker use. Employer Federation Nippon Keidanren's call for "flexibility" and "diverse 21st century ways of working" could help promote work-life balance if Nippon Keidanren was not also the driving force behind labor deregulation.

At present, acceptance of new ways of working to promote a more balanced approach in private sector firms is most likely to be possible under the following conditions (North, 2010):

1. The firm cares enough and is large enough to afford to establish an environment that promotes work-life balance as a component of corporate social responsibility (CSR) or to make the firm attractive to skilled, white-collar workers, especially women.
2. The worker works individually so that absence neither increases the burden on co-workers nor makes him/her the object of teasing or complaint; or the worker works on a project basis, making it easier to plan time for leave.
3. The worker has already been promoted or established a reputation as invaluable.
4. The worker has a spouse with equivalent income so that leave-taking does not threaten household finances or make female leave the default option.
5. Husband and wife take a gender-free stance, agreeing to share housework and childcare and treat both of their careers as equally valuable.
6. The firm approaches work-life balance from a health and wellbeing standpoint, aiming to reduce stress and increase health among its