

Karōshi

過労死

“Death From Overwork”



(Chu, Karōshi: Death from Overwork in Japan 2010)

Japanese Work Culture

Karōshi is a term in the Japanese language that translates directly to “Death From Overwork.” The phrases “I live to work” and “I work therefore I am” are also common among the people. Careers are often the first thing on a Japanese mind, putting family and even their own health behind. But why is this? Is this focus on working long hours actually beneficial or has it reached a point where it is crippling to the workers and the companies?

After World War Two, Japan was eager to show to the world that it was still able to be a top nation in the world once again. They did just that by rebuilding their destroyed economy, with help from the allies, in 1945 to the third highest in 2021, just behind the United States and China. Today Japan’s economy is built on manufacturing, service, and construction, even being home to some of the world's top brands like Sony and Honda. This success could be the result of the different work culture in Japan compared to much of the world. Japanese businesses are very team based, one person’s success is everyone’s and the same for failure. It is common for employees to stay past working hours until their boss or manager is finished to emphasize that team aspect. After leaving the office most employees go out for drinks together and spend most of the night socializing, only to return again to work in the early morning. If employees don’t follow these unspoken rules they’ll often be looked down and ridiculed by their peers and higher ups. These unwritten rules and pressure put on by peers and managers are very common.

Overworking and Underperforming

The Japanese people are no strangers to nationalism and strong work ethics, rooting throughout the very creation of the nation. While this proved great for the economy in the mid 20th century it now comes at the expense of the workers. Japan, with its 3rd best economy in the world, ranks only an average of 5.886 out of 10 on general happiness. Putting Japan only

58/156 countries (Dhiraj, 2019). Most studies taken seem to point towards the same issue, Japanese workers are overworked.

Japan has some of the longest working hours in the world. Working up to 80 hours of overtime a month is nothing surprising for the average employee. It's common for salary employees to not get paid overtime for these hours either, despite laws against it. A typical 9 to 5 day could easily run late into the night or even the early morning. Because of the "Our Business is our Family" aspect of many businesses it's expected for workers to go out for after work socializing, pushing out late into the night, dwindling free time even more.

Companies aren't forcing employees to stay these extra hours or go out after work, however not doing so would be career suicide. This is because it is seen as disrespectful to not spend time with those you work with. Caring for the well-being of your coworkers is a must in the Japanese culture. Even though employees are given around 20 days of vacation time a year most end up leaving 10 days unused. Those who are sick would also go into the office after hours to make up any work that they missed, instead of taking a sick day off. Workers are very hesitant to take days off because they don't want to burden their employees with their own work, for fear of being shunned by them. They also do not want to be seen as disrespecting the company and taking advantage of vacation time. If a company or manager gets upset with an employee they have the right to change the work location and even lower their pay. This fear of peer and company disapproval, and the possible consequences of them, is what keeps workers staying too long and refusing to exercise their own rights.

The stress induced from these long hours isn't something that can be brushed off by these workers. Serious mental health issues are common including high levels of anxiety and depression that can lead to suicide. Karōshi is a term used just for this, for when a person ends up dying as a cause of overworking. These deaths are formally recognized by the government and are usually classified with heart attacks, strokes, and suicide. It's estimated that roughly 60 people take their own life every day (Gates, 2018). That's an average of just over 21,000

suicides every year. In a country of 127 million people, nearly one in four people have considered committing suicide. The situation has gotten so bad that the Aokigahara Forest near the base of Mt. Fufi is infamously known as the Suicide Forest reaching a peak rate of 105 bodies found in a single year according to the forest's Rangers.

This complete dedication to the office diminishes free time drastically leaving no time for personal affairs or even a family. The population growth has been in decline since 1972 and even falling into the negatives since 2011. People just don't have the time to be able to commit to raising a family when they are expected to spend so much of their time at work. To go with this Japan has the longest life expectancy making it one of the oldest nations. These two factors combined Japan is quickly running out of labor, and with the current foreign labor force only making up 1.7% or the total disaster is imminent(Saiidi, 2018). It is almost impossible for the younger generation to move up the corporate ladder as it's already filled with people not retiring. Current workers are left to supply funds for health care and other elderly care as a result of this long living population. If left alone Japan is set to lose up to a third of its population by 2065(Saiidi, 2018). The lack of free time also affects the physical health of the employees. Some have reported having to stay until early in the morning, returning home to sleep for only an hour, then returning back to work. It is not uncommon to see businessmen sleeping on trains on their way to work or even bathrooms as a quick chance to catch up on lost sleep.

While it might seem impossible for the world's 3rd largest economy to be in danger of a complete downfall, it is a real challenge that Japan is facing. After World War Two Japan saw an economic boom raising its status by 10% every year and was on track to take over the United States as number one. Now for the past 30 years the GDP of Japan has remained somewhat constant at 4.9 trillion(Economics Explained, 2019). While this still keeps them as a top GDP in the world, this long period of stagnation is horrifying to economists. In the early 90s East Asian rivals in China and Korea managed to outperform the Japanese in key industries, taking away business. This rise in competition ended up making Japan lose its number two spot, it

previously held for 42 years, to China in 2011. The shift in demand has caused a cash rate of -.1% meaning that the central bank is actually paying other banks to take out loans (Economics Explained, 2019). In an effort to keep its spot Japan has taken upon 11 trillion in national debt. While this might not seem large compared to countries like the United States, it's actually 2.5 times the GDP. To add on Japan also is seeing a drop in productivity among its workers, being the lowest rating of the G7(Saiidi, 2018) with the cause being pointed towards being unmotivated and overworked. Japan is stuck in a difficult situation as it can't borrow any more money, is filled with an unproductive workforce, and the areas where it is productive are being heavily contested by other nations.

A Need for Change

It is obvious that a change is desperately needed to keep Japan on top and to save it from economic turmoil. In recent times there have been efforts by the public and Japanese Officials to try and lessen this type of work culture on its people. Recently a 4 day, 32 hour, work week has been proposed but not yet implemented. Removing the traditional 5 day work week is no new idea. It has been discussed about all over the world for decades. Microsoft Japan even hosted a small test of a 3 day work week citing that productivity went up 40% and reduced daily office costs (Westfall, 2021). A study by Ohio State University has shown that a 6 hour work day has increased the productivity and happiness of Nurses by 64% and 20% respectively (Ohio State, 2018). Despite the studies Japanese Corporations are still hesitant to incorporate these policies for the fear of productivity loss. Japanese workers are also hesitant of a lower work week as they fear it will result in lower wages. In light of recent events from the economic warning to the flexibility that was allowed during Covid, there does seem a possibility that change is coming.

The government has gone as far as implementing new national holidays, for example Mountain Day totaling to 19 national holidays, as an effort to give more time off. In addition to

holidays the government has promoted a new holiday like day in 2016 called Premium Fridays. Premium Fridays is an effort to, on the last Friday of every month, let workers go at 3pm to encourage more spending. However only 4% of employees have reported that they actually leave early on these days (Saiidi, 2018). Necessary rest periods have been implemented making it mandatory for a worker to go home and stop working inbetween days, as it's common for people to stay in the office for multiple days at a time. Companies have also implemented Flex Time, which is a time for workers to unwind and relax during the work day. Some buildings even have automatic systems to shut off lights at 10pm to discourage people from working too late.

There are currently worker rights laws put in place to prevent overworking. It is illegal for companies to have workers stay for too much overtime. Article 36 of the Japanese Labor Law limits overtime to 5 hours a day, 45 a week, or 360 a year. However, employees rarely report the illegal overtime as they don't want to be seen negatively in the eyes of their peers or bosses. The topic of deflation was an issue for a short period and actually successfully avoided, because in 2013 the government took to doubling the amount of cash that was flowing by just printing more. This was able to raise inflation back to a steady 2-3%.

As there have been some implementations at a government and company level to create a better workforce, it seems necessary to implement changes at a cultural level as well. Increasing the foreign workforce and housing more foreign companies could help Japanese companies see how productive people can be if they aren't overworked. This might come naturally as the current Japanese workforce dwindles and companies are forced to hire more foreign workers to keep up with labor demand. It is also up to the current workers to express their distaste on the situation to their higher ups. If the studies are anything to go by, Japan should only see gains from lessening the stress on its workforce. Without these changes Japan's economy, and in turn the country as a whole, is in danger.

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