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The Changing Workplace / Becoming 'ikumen' offers new insights

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The Yomiuri Shimbun

Satoshi Ochi takes his son to day care in Meguro Ward, Tokyo, on his way to the office in December 2014.

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The Yomiuri Shimbun This is the fifth installment of a series.

In a quiet residential area of Tokyo's Meguro Ward, 32-year-old Satoshi Ochi rides up a hill with his 5-year-old second son in the backseat of his bicycle. Taking his son to day care is his daily duty.

Until four years ago, Ochi worked very hard at a consulting company, aiming to be promoted before all his colleagues who entered the company at the same time. His first and second sons were born in 2006 and 2009, but he left raising them entirely to his wife.

He worked until midnight, returned home by taxi, and went back to work after eating breakfast. That was his life.

One day, his wife started crying with an anguished look. "How long do we have to live this kind of life?" she said.

No other male employees at his company had taken paternity leave, but Ochi thought, "[My career] will mean nothing if my family breaks up."

He decided to take paternity leave for two months. In addition, he used a shorter working hours program to finish work at 5 p.m. for about two years. It has made him keenly aware that he must produce results within a scheduled time frame.

"I had a solid record at work and relationships of trust with people around me, so I could keep working while raising children," Ochi said.

Many men feel uneasy about taking paternity leave, as it could affect their career. However, paternity leave can be beneficial when considered in a different light.

Sohei Morita, 35, took paternity leave for six months after his son was born. Morita is involved with data analysis and other work at major mobile phone game site operator Gree Inc. and during his leave, he carefully read articles in English on the latest technologies. He also volunteered in his community.

“[During my leave,] I could make efforts to improve myself, which I’d postponed under the pressure of the work at hand,” said Morita, 35. “I could broaden my perspectives.”

Morita came to think that “working at the office is easier than raising a child.” He enjoyed working at his company after returning to the office, and became even more productive than before.

Employees who actively take part in raising children need administrative superiors who are understanding of “ikumen” (men actively involved in child rearing). Norifumi Hashimoto, 48, chief of the development and planning department of fashion department store operator Lumine Co., is considered by himself and others to be such a superior. His favorite phrase is “Guys, let’s go home early.”

Actively using a flexible working hours system, Hashimoto will often tell others, “I’m going home at 4 p.m. today.”

He was busy working when his two daughters were little and has almost no memory of playing with them. He does not want to make his subordinates regret missing the time when their children were small and cute.

On the other hand, Hashimoto cannot allow the quality of people’s work to fall. “Reduce unproductive overtime work and increase efficiency” — that was the solution he found.

Thanks to this policy, Hashimoto’s subordinate Kenji Tsuchihashi, 34, can go home early to spend time with his son. He even takes long holidays for family trips in periods other than the mid-summer and year-end holiday seasons. He was able to improve efficiency by reducing the generation of documents that are not necessarily important.

However, there are still very few managers like Hashimoto.

According to a survey conducted in December 2013 on 1,000 men by the Japanese Trade Union Confederation (Rengo), 45 percent of the respondents said there was no one at their workplace who was understanding of men’s participation in raising children.

“Women’s advancement in the workforce and men’s participation in household affairs and raising children are two sides of the same coin,” said Junji Miyahara of Toray Corporate Business Research Inc. “People in management positions should change themselves first.” [Speech](#)

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