

More workers taking vacation

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Japanese employees are notorious for overworking, putting in a lot of overtime and never taking their full vacations. However, a new group of companies are starting to buck that trend by pushing their workers to take vacations, even extended ones — and for good reason.

They know that employees work better when they have a life outside the office. Those companies pushing for vacation are typically smaller, newer companies that know they must find ways to retain and encourage their employees by giving them time away from work.

Their new approach fits well with the target of the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry's attempts to increase vacation time. The ministry's target is to get 70 percent of workers to take their entire paid leave. Unfortunately, it has a long way to go to meet that goal. Currently only 47.1 percent of workers use all their paid leave, a figure that increased little by little until 2012, when it dipped down again because of the stagnant economy.

The more innovative companies have started to achieve that goal of full vacation time in a number of ways.

A few companies, such as Recruit Career Co., an outplacement firm, and Opt Inc., an online advertising agency, have even started to pay their employees to take leave. They give them an allowance to get out of the office, live their life, take a vacation or brush up their education and come back ready to work.

Some firms now report that up to 90 percent of their employees take all the vacation owed them. Those companies also have found better ways to organize work schedules and still keep the work going.

They have also simply been more open and accommodating. They have allowed them to come back to work after taking longer periods of time off: for example, two years to get an MBA or a year to volunteer in foreign countries with an agency such as the Japan International Cooperation Agency.

For those companies where the quality of work performed has become the central concern, vacation time is essential.

Being flexible with individuals, and giving them sufficient mental rest, also implies a very different power structure, one where employee input and employee needs are just as important as the economic bottom line.

Those companies promoting paid leaves, whether short term or long term, are in line with what is known about workplaces — that time off matters just as much as time on. The traditional Japanese company that tacitly, or even openly, discourages time off should wake up to the realistic needs of its employees and to their legal right to vacation.

Taking vacation time does not constitute laziness or selfishness; it is the fulfillment of a human need that contributes to efficiency, energy and a human focus in the workplace.

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