

# Japanese ways of getting work done no longer cut it in today's world

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How hard do the Japanese work? So hard that making them work less tops Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's labor reform agenda. So hard that the Japanese word *karoshi* (death due to overwork) is understood worldwide. And yet, not so very hard after all, says Shukan Gendai (April 29).

Consider the numbers. According to the Databook of International Labor Statistics, the average Japanese in 2014 worked 37.7 hours a week – as against 42 for the average American, 41.4 for the average Briton, 40 for the average German. Even in France, famous (or infamous) for socialist protection (or coddling) of workers, the hourly average topped Japan's, though barely – 37.8. Among the Group of Seven countries whose numbers were available (Italy's weren't) only Canada fell behind (or pulled ahead of, if leisure is the goal) Japan, with an average 37.1 weekly working hours.

Different countries measure differently and the comparisons are not absolute, but they are indicative, and in Japan's case a pronounced downward trend in working hours is supported by other statistics. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) says Japanese worked on average 1729 hours in 2014 – down from 2000-plus in the 1970s, when the economy was soaring, and the 1980s, when it peaked. Those, Shukan Gendai seems to be saying, were the good old days.

Back then, recalls Toyokazu Ono, who joined Matsushita Electric in 1971, “working 100 hours of overtime a month was normal.” Now it stirs fears of *karoshi* and the corrosive publicity it brings. Employers are almost desperate to get employees out on time.

A generation ago there was no such thing as “on time.” “We didn't think of

overtime as hardship,” says Ono. “That’s why it didn’t break us physically. Work and our companies were everything for us. We loved our work. We wanted to work more.”

Making allowances for nostalgic exaggeration, the old, now somewhat tattered image of the “corporate warrior” was not pure fiction. It reflected the dedication that Japan’s postwar growth, which astonishes even today, rested on. Aging veterans speak wistfully of working with such absorption they forgot to eat and sleep. Governments of the day would never have dreamed of seeking to limit working hours. No one thought of asking it to.

What changed? Two things essentially, says Jonan Shinyo Kinko Bank president Tsuyoshi Yoshihara. One: the team spirit among workers snapped. Two (not unrelated to one): the goal narrowed. Work, to be meaningful, must have a larger purpose than mere profits or a mere livelihood. The old sense of mission, of serving society, of reconstructing a war-shattered nation, faded. Prosperity, once achieved, is something of a bore. What to achieve next? More prosperity? Corporate profits and individual affluence – even when they are achievable, as in today’s struggling economy they often are not – won’t drive workers en masse to the excesses of all-out effort that were commonplace a generation ago.

“Ordering employers to shorten working hours,” says Yoshihara, “sends the message that work is a drag. The real goal of labor reform should be to make work enjoyable again.”

How to do that in a rapidly aging society which desperately needs children who will not be born unless parents are permitted to divide their time between work and family is not made clear. On some sort of answer emerging, concludes Shukan Gendai, hinges Japan’s future.

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