

Live to Work or Work to Live? The Search for Work-life Balance in 21st Century Japan

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the debate around and current state of “work-life balance” in Japan. While work-life balance has become a topic of discussion in Japan, little progress has been made in the direction of “improved” work-life balance. Based on a comparison of pre-“bubble” and post-“bubble” Japan, a model is developed of the factors that influence, and the outcomes of, individuals’ work-life choices. Influencing factors include specific economic, social, cultural, and demographic conditions, and changes in these conditions. Outcomes include efforts by government, companies, and individuals to improve work-life balance. Among other conclusions, the author argues that “culture matters,” and that the meaning of work itself differs in Japan from that in other countries.

Introduction

“Work-life balance” is trying to become a buzzword, and a reality, in Japan

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today. So far, it's not having much luck.

Statistics paint a grim picture. Working hours remain long by industrialized-country standards¹, and are significantly underreported thanks to widespread unpaid overtime. On-the-job stress and suicide rates are up. Japan is one of just two countries – the other is South Korea – where *karoshi* (death from overwork) is a recognized phenomenon.² A 2007 study by IriS International Research Institutes found Japan to rank highest among 24 countries surveyed in the proportion of respondents reporting “dissatisfaction with work-life balance.”³

This is not to say that efforts are not being made to address the issue. Pressures toward improved work-life balance (WLB) have been building steadily over the past two decades: from individuals seeking healthier, better-balanced lives; from companies that view WLB-friendly policies as a way to attract top recruits, including women, in a shrinking labor market; from the Japanese government, as a way to address the problem of population decline; and from academics and commentators who see connections between poor WLB and problems such as rising divorce rates, domestic violence, and low labor productivity.

Yet, gains are small and elusive. After falling steadily since the 1950s, reported work hours have recently begun to rise.⁴ Employee take-up of flexible and family-friendly work arrangements is low. And while growing numbers of 20-something Japanese are postponing or opting out of the corporate rat race for “non-standard” jobs that allow them to pursue more fulfilling private lives, this is more often viewed as a problem than as a remedy.

Why the lack of progress? Are Japanese individuals and companies simply

subject to the same forces that make the achievement of work-life balance a difficult task in any country, namely economic necessity in a globalized and increasingly competitive world where working less most often means earning less and settling for a lower standard of living? Or are there characteristics particular to Japan that make the debate over, and the challenges of achieving, WLB a different proposition from what is in other countries? Is it possible that use of the word “progress” itself, to describe a shift in the direction of greater focus on the “non-work” side of life, imposes on the debate a Western framework that sits uneasily on a nation that drinks from a different cultural well?

This chapter examines the debate around and the reality of work-life balance in Japan in the first decade of the 21st century. Work-life arrangements and choices are compared across two distinct periods: Japan’s “strong growth” years, from around 1955 through the 1980s, and post-Bubble Japan, from around 1990 to today. It is seen that the context in which work-life choices are made has undergone significant change, driven by external forces, cultural change, and companies’ responses to both of these. The picture that emerges is one of a nation caught in a complex web of conflicting pressures – demographic, economic, managerial, social, and cultural – that push and pull on organizations and individuals, some toward a “healthier” work-life balance and some in the other direction.⁵

Understanding Work-life Choices: A Model

Figure 1 presents a generic model of individuals’ work-life choices, the factors that influence those choices, and their outcomes. This model is developed from the author’s research of work-life balance in Japan and from paper presentations and discussions at the “Ways of Living: Work, Organizations, Communities, and Lifestyle Choice” colloquium held in December 2008 in Melbourne, Australia.⁶

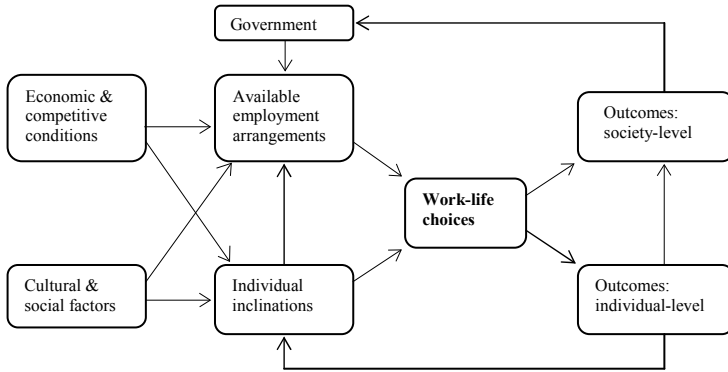


Figure 1. Generic model of the influences and outcomes of individuals' work-life choices.

At the center of the model lies “work-life choices”: the amount of time and energy that individuals devote to work, versus the time and energy they devote to other things such as family, individual pursuits (e.g., hobbies), and community activities. Time refers to measurable hours. Energy includes behavior and attitudes; for example, how hard one works, or how much one invests emotionally in the workplace or the family.

Individuals' actual work-life choices are a product of their individual inclinations and the employment arrangements that are available to them. Individual inclinations are the importance individuals place on, and their preferences for devoting themselves to, work vs. non-work pursuits. These are shaped by economic, social, and cultural factors, as well as by the level of satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with current work-life arrangements. Available employment arrangements include employment options and the human resource (HR) policies and practices of employers. These are shaped by economic, social, and cultural factors, as well as by government.

There are two levels of outcomes from individuals' work-life choices. Individual-level outcomes include such things as economic well-being, mental and physical health, levels of happiness or stress, and the strength of relationships with family. Individual-level outcomes feed back into individuals' inclinations; for example, dissatisfaction with individual-level outcomes may influence a person's inclinations and thus trigger a change in work-life choice. Society-level outcomes include such things as national health levels, the birth rate, and social issues. When people's work-life choices are viewed as contributing to broader social problems, government may take action to influence work-life choices through its ability to shape employment arrangements, for example through labor law.

Let us now use this model to compare people's work-life choices across two distinct periods in post-war Japan.

“Pre-Bubble” Work-Life Choices in Japan

Japan is well known for its post-war “economic miracle” and for Japanese companies' success and leadership in automobiles, electronics, and other industries. The foundations of this success are many and complex, but counted among them are...

- social arrangements characterized by a clear division of responsibility between men (breadwinners) and women (homemakers);
- a strong work ethic, which gave higher priority to building the nation and gaining economic security for the family than to pursuit of outside-of-work fulfillment; and
- a set of particularly “Japanese” human resource practices, including “lifetime employment” and seniority-based pay and promotion.

These and other features made up a holistic system that can be said to have functioned successfully during the nation's strong-growth years, from

around 1955 to the end of the 1980s. Males typically pursued the dream of “lifetime employment” with a major corporation, studying hard to get into a top university from which the best companies recruited. Once hired, they devoted their lives to the company, working long hours (often coming home late and leaving for work early the next morning) and spending little time with their families by Western standards. In return they received long-term financial security and the social status that came with employment at a big-name company. Work also provided order and meaning to life, and an arena to satisfy their social needs.

Women also studied hard, went to the best schools they could get into, and joined companies after graduation. But few had long-term careers as a goal; the typical pattern was to work for a few years and then quit the company to get married and have children. After marriage women ran the household, controlled the family purse strings, were in charge of the children’s education, and had a social world of their own: typically the neighborhood and other housewives in similar circumstances.

Under these arrangements, companies got a well-educated, hard-working, and highly committed workforce that they could invest in for the long term. Salary was structured to match the successive stages of life: low in the early years when employees were single; rising with the increasing financial demands of marriage, child-raising, and older children’s education costs; and leveling off as retirement neared. The nation prospered, rising from the ashes of World War II to become the second largest economy in the world. And Japanese society was, on the whole, stable and peaceful, with a relatively even distribution of wealth and low crime rates that were the envy of most any other country. To be sure, there were problems: overwork, fathers with little presence at home, “education mothers” pressuring their children to excel academically, and redundant workers kept on company

payrolls. But overall, the system functioned well. There was little discussion of, and no term for what we now call, work-life balance.

New Realities, New Issues in “Post-Bubble” Japan

Why has work-life balance become an issue in Japan today? Because economic, managerial, social, cultural, and demographic changes have occurred, and continue to occur, that have caused the pre-bubble system to work less well in terms of producing satisfactory outcomes for individuals, companies, and the nation. The year 1990 serves as a useful turning point for a “before” and “after” comparison of work-life balance in Japan. 1990 marks the end of Japan’s “bubble economy” and the beginning of the “lost decade” of slow or negative economic growth, which had broad repercussions for Japan’s workforce and their families. It is also a time when a number of social, cultural, and demographic trends that are related to

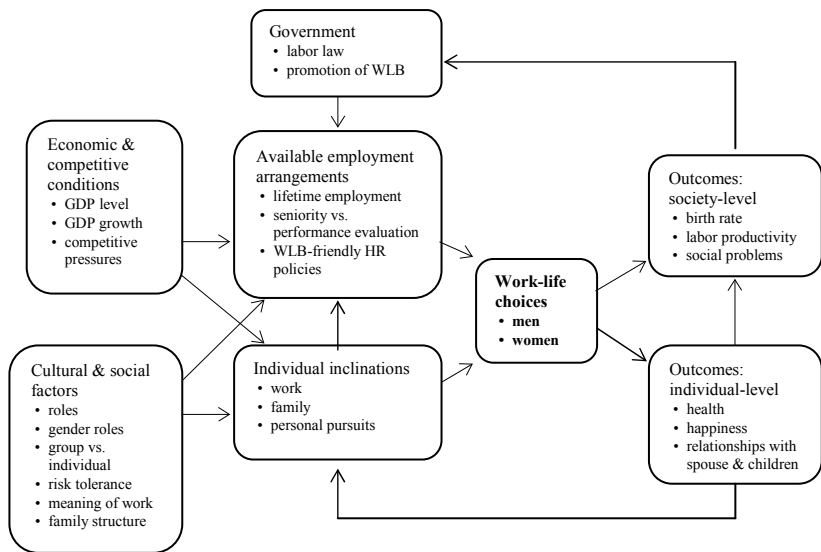


Figure 2. Applied model: the influences and outcomes of individuals’ work-life choices in Japan.

work-life balance issues were becoming evident or more prominent.

Figure 2 applies the generic “work-life choice” model (introduced above) to the specific case of Japan. The influencing variables, work-life choices, and outcomes included in the applied version of the model are those around which today’s debate on work-life balance revolves. We now examine how these variables, choices, and outcomes have changed, and what this change has meant for work-life balance.

Economic and Competitive Conditions

The landmark event in post-1980 Japan is what is known as the “bubble”: a period of steep asset price inflation that occurred during the last half of the 1980s. Between 1986 and 1990, spurred by expansionary monetary policies designed to cushion Japan’s export economy from the recessionary effects of a strengthened yen following the Plaza Accord,⁷ huge amounts of Japanese savings – accumulated over 30-plus years of economic expansion – were poured into the country’s property and stock markets, driving real estate and stock prices to extremely high levels.

In 1992 the Bubble collapsed, sending stock and property prices crashing and ushering in Japan’s “lost decade” of low or negative growth. The extent and duration of the downturn can be seen in stock and real estate prices. The Nikkei stock index, which had peaked at 38,916 yen in December 1989, did not bottom out until April 2003 – at 7,608 yen, less than a fifth of its 1989 high. Japanese home prices reached their high mark in 1990, but dropped sharply in the early 1990s and continued to decline until in 2005 they had fallen by an average of 40% overall, 65% in major cities, and 80% in Tokyo.⁸ GDP growth resumed in the 2000s, but at much more modest levels than prior to 1990.

Even before the bubble collapsed, competitive pressures were increasing for Japanese companies, with rising labor costs, an appreciating yen, and the emergence of strong competitors in other (particularly Asian) countries. After 1992, with balance sheets damaged by the collapse of asset values and domestic demand down due to economic stagnation, the pressures on companies to reduce costs became very strong. This caused “lifetime employment” and seniority-based pay and promotion systems to begin to erode. Widely adopted by major Japanese companies after 1960 to resolve the fierce labor-management conflict that marked the 1950s and to attract and keep workers in a rapidly expanding economy, “lifetime employment” and seniority-based pay and promotion had significant merits for companies: they secured a committed labor force that tied its fortunes to that of the firm, worked hard, and could be invested in for the long run. However, there were costs as well. Companies were forced to keep even underperforming workers on their payrolls, and to continue to raise their wages as they built up seniority. Unable to lay off “regular” employees, companies also had limited ability to downsize when demand dropped.

When the economy was growing and companies were prospering, the costs of “lifetime employment” and seniority-based pay and promotion were bearable. But with the bursting of the bubble and the ensuing economic downturn, these costs became prohibitive. Thus the 1990s saw the beginning of permanent layoffs of regular full-time workers by major companies, a shift to more limited-term contracts, and increased use of part-time and temporary (*haken*) labor. Between 1992 and 2007, facilitated by changes in Japanese labor law, non-standard work contracts grew from 10% to 30% of the workforce.⁹ Employee pay and promotion systems also began to change – toward less emphasis on seniority and greater emphasis on performance.¹⁰ A 2004 survey by the Japan Management Association found that 83% of

227 participating companies had introduced performance-based HR management systems in the post-bubble era.¹¹

Social and Cultural Change

Gender roles

While gender roles in Japan remain quite clearly differentiated in comparison to those in many Western countries, they have gradually begun to blur, with women increasingly choosing (or desiring) to pursue careers rather than be full-time housewives, and men displaying more openness to being involved at home and with child-raising. This trend can be seen in popular culture – for instance in television dramas, which are recognized as reflecting and reconfirming existing social structures and also legitimizing social change.¹² A study of Japanese TV dramas by Hilaria M. Gossman found that 1960s and 1970s dramas portrayed the “men work, women stay home” model positively; female characters were either happy “reliable mothers” whose life centered on the home, or unhappy “suffering women” whose life lay outside the domestic sphere. In the late 1970s and 1980s, the traditional model began to show cracks; in a 1977 hit drama by famous script writer Taichi Yamada, for instance, a 40-year-old housewife has an extramarital affair because she cannot bear the isolation of life married to a husband who works all the time. By the 1990s, dramas centered on working women, and even men taking on household and child-care responsibilities, had become common, as they remain today.¹³

Marriage

Marriage views and practices have also changed. Marrying late or not marrying have become more common, and socially acceptable. In 1980,

only 24% of Japanese women in the 25-29 age range were unmarried; in 2008, 59% were.¹⁴ Derogatory terms for older unmarried women such as “hai misu” (high miss) are heard less frequently than they once were, and single career women are portrayed positively (though not without challenges to face) in popular culture and the media.

The view that the foundation of a marriage should be a close personal relationship between husband and wife, where husband and wife do things together and enjoy each other’s company, has gained favor in comparison to the past, when there was greater emphasis on finding (or being introduced to) a partner who met certain economic or social status criteria. There are fewer *omiai* (arranged meeting) marriages in Japan today, more “love” marriages. Husbands’ sharing of housework and child-raising, though still small by Western standards, is on the rise.¹⁵ Incompatibility between spouses, once of secondary importance, is now widely viewed as legitimate grounds for divorce.¹⁶

Work ethic

During the 1980s the word *shinjinrui* (“new breed”) came into popular usage to describe a new generation of young Japanese with a more lax attitude toward work than that held by previous generations. Born after 1960 and coming of age in the 1970s and afterwards, *shinjinrui* did not experience the economic hardship that their parents had in post-war Japan. The Japan they grew up in was a rich country, and they had enjoyed the fruits of that wealth, having their university education paid for by their parents, traveling abroad and seeing other lifestyles, and developing a taste for the good life.¹⁷

For this generation, the concepts of hard work and sacrifice for the company and the nation were alien – at least in comparison to previous generations.

To their seniors at the company, *shinjinrui* were difficult to understand, and soft. Many preferred to go home at five o'clock rather than work overtime or go drinking with colleagues after work, and not a few quit their new fulltime jobs after a few months, something quite rare in previous decades. The attitude gap between *shinjinrui* and management was much discussed, and managers struggled both to shape new recruits into hard-working employees and to adjust the way they themselves managed so as to not alienate and lose younger employees, who had been carefully recruited as the future of the company.

Impact on individuals and companies

These social and cultural changes – the shift away from traditional gender roles, changing views toward marriage, and a weakened work ethic – may seem mild by Western standards, for Japan remains a country in which men dominate the business world, marriage is an assumed goal for most people, and people work hard. But they are significant changes for Japan, and have affected both individual inclinations and available work arrangements. Men are less eager than before to devote their lives to the company at the expense of time and energy spent with family or in personal pursuits. Japanese still take their jobs seriously and work hard, but do not put in overtime as much, or as unquestioningly, as they once did. Fewer women now embrace the “work for a few years, then quit to get married” model; more aspire to build careers, and are willing to delay marriage or even remain single if marriage means giving up meaningful work. And both men and women increasingly seek in marriage a relationship that includes more than simply playing the role of breadwinner or homemaker; this requires more time spent together, and therefore less time spent at work.

Companies have had to respond to these social and cultural changes, and to

the shifting inclinations of their existing and future workforce, in order to successfully recruit and retain quality employees. One way that they have done this is to introduce “work-life balance” friendly HR policies, such as reduced work hours, flextime, parental leave, and child-care support. The government website “Change! Japan” provides a list of 160 major Japanese companies and their corporate policies and practices in the areas of child care leave, nursing care leave, flextime work options, maternity and paternity leave, financial assistance for child and nursing care, and work-from-home options.¹⁸ The impression one gets reading through this data is that, though some firms have clearly done more than others, overall, Japan’s name-brand companies have come a long way in making family- and personal life-friendly work arrangements available to their core employees. While a few companies began doing this in the 1980s, the vast majority of company WLB-friendly policies were introduced in the 1990s.¹⁹

Work-Life Choices and Outcomes in Today’s Japan

Individual Level

While Japanese individuals are increasingly inclined to (or would like to) spend more time and energy on family and individual pursuits and less on work, and while companies have introduced new HR policies that make this more possible than it once was, the evidence does not show that individuals’ actual work-life choices have changed all that much. Work hours remain long. According to the OECD *Factbook*, Japanese work an average of 1784 hours per year in 2006, slightly above the average for OECD countries.²⁰ Actual work hours, however, are almost certainly significantly higher than this given the widespread practice of “service overtime” (*saabisu zangyou*, or “*sabi-zan*”): unpaid and unreported overtime. A 2006 survey found that 30% of male private-sector employees in Tokyo and Osaka work over 12 hours a day.²¹ According to a 2007 Labor Ministry survey, full-time

employees take only half their allotted paid holidays.²²

And although WLB-friendly work options are increasingly available, few employees are choosing to take advantage of them. Only 0.5% of working fathers take the parental leave that the law entitles them to, and only 30% of working women return to work after having children.²³

This is not to say that Japanese are satisfied with their current work-life options and choices; in fact, the evidence suggests that dissatisfaction has increased. A 2007 survey by IriS International Research Institutes found Japan to rank highest among 24 countries surveyed in the proportion of respondents reporting “dissatisfaction with work-life balance.” And the fact that the term “work-life balance” has entered the national vocabulary – a Google search for the Japanese pronunciation of the English term, “*waaku raifu baransu*,”²⁴ produces 930,000 hits – shows that it is on people’s minds. Though not specifically about WLB satisfaction, longitudinal survey data collected by the Japanese government on “degree of satisfaction with your life” shows satisfaction levels decreasing steadily since the early 1980s.²⁵ This is not due to falling living standards – Japan’s per capita GNP has risen steadily during this period – but rather, most likely, to lifestyle issues such as WLB.

Dissatisfaction with the outcomes of their current work-life choices can lead individuals to reassess and potentially change those choices. To cut back on work in order to spend more time on family or personal interests, however, can have high economic costs, particularly in an economic environment where secure full-time jobs have become hard to find and permanent layoffs (*risutora*, or being “restructured”) are common. And so, though many would like to “downshift,” few actually do. The above-cited survey that reported Japanese to rank highest in dissatisfaction with work-life balance

also found Japanese to be pessimistic about the prospects of WLB improvement and passive about pushing to achieve it. “It can’t be helped” (*shikata ga nai*) is a phrase commonly heard in Japan, and one that many use to express the resignation felt toward having to work long hours at the expense of non-work activities.

The pulls that many Japanese feel both toward and away from improved work-life balance are illustrated by the “freeter” phenomenon. The term “freeter,” a combination of “free” or “freelance” plus *arbeiter* (German for laborer), was coined in the late 1980s to describe the growing numbers of young Japanese adults who do not have a permanent full-time job but instead hold one or more part-time jobs or move from one short-term job to another. During the bubble economy, freeters had a positive image: as people opting out of the rat race to pursue their dreams. But when economic conditions worsened following the collapse of the bubble, more people became freeters out of necessity. Both the positive and negative reasons for becoming a freeter are shown in a 2001 survey by *Web Japan* that asked freeters why they chose this lifestyle. The responses, in order of frequency, were: “to give priority to the things I myself want to do” (40%); “as a stopgap until I can find a job I want to do” (23%); “I wanted to get a regular position, but under present employment conditions that was impossible” (18%); and “Even with a job as a regular employee, I would change jobs anyway” (8%).²⁶

Society Level

Public discussion of work-life balance in Japan typically focuses on its potential to help create a “healthier” society in general and to address specific issues that are seen as nation-level problems. The Japanese government’s “Work-life Balance Charter” (see below) defines a society

with good work-life balance as one in which “Citizens find meaning and fulfillment in their work, and while carrying out their work responsibilities are able, in both family and community life, to choose and realize diverse ways of living that match each stage of their lives, such as child-raising, middle age, and old age.”²⁷ The annual white paper on labor economy released by the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry in August 2006 stated that Japan needs “to create an employment system in which (workers) can strive for a balance between work and life in order for our country and society to continue economic development amid depopulation.”²⁸

Specific issues that are part of the WLB discussion – problems for which poor WLB is seen as a cause or for which improved WLB is seen as a part of the cure – include work-related health issues; population decline and a shrinking workforce; family breakdown; and low worker productivity.

Health issues

Health issues seen as related to poor WLB include death and disability from overwork, and stress. While it is difficult to show conclusively that work-related stress, disability, and death are on the rise, available data suggests that this is the case. The suicide rate for Japanese males doubled between 1992 and 2003, from 20 per 100,000 to around 40 per 100,000, and 65% of companies report rising levels of mental illness among employees.²⁹ Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare data show that workers’ compensation claims for both *karoshi* and work-related psychological problems have increased in recent years (see Table 1). Ministry officials attribute the increase in worker’s compensation cases involving psychological problems to long working hours and the spread of performance-based pay scales.³⁰ A Mental Health Institute spokesperson cites increased emphasis on individual performance, which is at odds with

the group orientation that is a deeply-held cultural value, as a cause of mental turmoil for Japanese workers: “People tend to be individualized under the new working patterns. When people worked in teams they were happier.”³¹

Year	Number of workers’ compensation claims for work-related death and disability	Number of workers’ compensation claims for work-related psychological disorders & depression
2002	819	341
2003	742	447
2004	816	524
2005	869	656
2006	938	819

Table 1. Workers’ compensation claims, 2002-2006.³²

As in many countries, in Japan there is a sense among workers that the sheer amount of work that has to be done has increased, due to the spread of information technology, reductions in staff, and an increasingly competitive environment for companies. In a 2007 government survey of regular employees at Japanese companies, 67% reported that their workload and work responsibilities had increased compared to five years earlier.³³ A Japanese employee in his 40s observes:

Thirty years ago, ordinary workers didn’t need to worry about how much money their company was making – that was the job of the president and top management. Ordinary employees just had to do their job. My father was a bus driver. All he had to do was drive his bus. But now even ordinary employees have to think about their company’s financial performance. A bus driver today can’t simply drive the bus.

He/she must also worry about company profit, and what might be done to increase revenues, reduce costs, or operate more efficiently.³⁴

Population decline

Japan is an aging society with one of the lowest birthrates in the world. While most other developed countries still have population growth, Japan's population has begun to shrink. The country's fertility rate – the number of children a woman is expected to give birth to in her lifetime – has steadily declined over the last two decades, from 1.57 in 1989 to 1.25 in 2005. (The average birthrate in developed countries is 1.6 children per woman, while the rate needed to prevent population decline is 2.1.)³⁵ The nation also faces a looming labor shortage, with 6.8 million baby boomers scheduled to retire in 2007-2009, and immigration strictly limited. By one estimate, the Japanese workforce will shrink by 10 million, or 15%, between the years 2003 and 2030.³⁶ These facts spell trouble in the form of a shrinking domestic market for companies and increased strain on the nation's finances, as taxes on a smaller workforce must support a larger non-working proportion of the population.

The Japanese government acknowledges that the falling birthrate is connected to job-related factors. Among those factors:

- Job security has declined with the erosion of lifetime employment and the increase in non-standard work contracts and performance-based evaluation. As a result, many young people don't feel financially stable enough to start families.
- Underdeveloped maternity leave and child care options (compared to Western countries), plus societal expectations (weakened but far from extinct) that mothers be full-time mothers, make it difficult for

women to have children and continue a career.

- With long work hours, husbands have little time to help out with child-raising. This places a heavy burden on the wife, particularly in an age of nuclear families where grandparents and other family members are not around to help.

In addition, procreation generally requires having sex. When husbands come home late and exhausted from overwork, and when spousal relationships suffer due to work stress and lack of time together, less sex takes place.³⁷ International surveys have shown that Japanese married couples have sex less frequently than couples of any other nation.³⁸

Family breakdown

It would be problematic to argue, and I do not believe, that Japan is less “healthy” than other nations in terms of family health and relationships among family members. But there are a number recognized of social problems in Japan that have developed or grown worse in recent years and that appear to be related in part to weakened relationships between spouses or between children and parents. These include:

- *hiki-komori*: people who withdraw from society, shunning other people and not venturing out of their home or room;
- *toukou kyohi*: the phenomenon of children or young people refusing to go to school;
- domestic violence, in particular that between children and parents; and
- rising divorce rates, especially around retirement age.

It is argued that among the causes of these problems is the division-of-labor arrangement under which husbands and wives lead quite separate lives, with

men focused on work – “the company as family” is a common phrase – and women focused on home and children. This is often exacerbated by the practice of *tanshin funin*: husband and family living apart when the husband is transferred to a different city or country but the wife and children stay put because they don’t want to move or interrupt the children’s education.

Husbands/fathers thus often have low visibility and involvement at home, meaning that many children grow up without, or with a very distant, a father figure. This makes it harder for healthy father-child relationships to develop, and in some cases may also negatively affect social and emotional growth. It also hinders the development of a strong bond between husband and wife, one that goes beyond the roles of provider and homekeeper to encompass the development of common interests and friendship. This is clearly a contributing factor to the boom in middle-age or retirement-age divorce (*jukunen rikon*, or “mature age divorce”); one hears and reads frequently of married couples who have led separate lives while the husband was working but find, upon the husband’s retirement, that they have little in common, get on each others’ nerves, and dislike spending time together.

Labor productivity

A final issue often tied to work-life balance is labor productivity. In 2006 Japan ranked 20th out of 30 OECD countries surveyed in overall per capita productivity, and was the least productive of any G7 nation.³⁹ The problem is not with blue-collar productivity – Japanese firms, known for excellence in manufacturing, have excelled in this area – but with white-collar productivity, which remains low despite the erosion of guaranteed employment and the shift toward more performance-based pay and promotion schemes. This is particularly problematic for Japanese firms: with the IT revolution and with much of Japanese manufacturing moving

overseas to access cheaper labor, innovativeness and white-collar productivity have increased in importance for companies' international competitiveness.

Long meetings, meaningless reports, slow decision-making, doing things a certain way because “that’s how it’s done” – these and other “inefficiencies” are famously a part of working for a Japanese company. But with long hours and overtime an accepted, almost given, aspect of the “salaryman” life, there is little pressure to raise efficiency. Why hurry if you have to stay late at the office anyway because that’s the norm? Leaving the office at five o’clock while your colleagues are still working is considered selfish and invites disapproval. After-work socializing is also considered part of the job – valuable for relationship-building and discussion that, with alcohol as a cover, can be more open and frank than that conducted in the sober workplace. And so, in the absence of pressure to complete one’s work in a limited amount of time, Japanese productivity continues to lag behind that of other nations.

Work-Life Balance as Remedy

Improved work-life balance – which is to say less time and energy spent on work, and more spent on “life” – is today increasingly being held out in Japan as a potential, if partial, remedy for the individual- and society-level issues described above. The keys to achieving this are to reduce work hours and to increase the availability and take-up of WLB-friendly HR policies such as flextime, on-site child care, and parental leave. The potential benefits, it is argued, include the following.

- Reduced work hours would go a long way toward reducing stress and work-related illness. Workers would suffer less sleep deprivation, and would benefit mentally from the refreshment and change of pace

of doing things other than work. Better rested and healthier physically, employees might also perform better at work, lessening some of the anxiety around performance-based evaluation.

- Reduced work hours and an increase in flextime schemes, on-site childcare, and maternity leave would make it easier for women to have children and pursue a career, instead of requiring them to choose one or the other. This would help increase the birthrate and also raise female participation in the workforce, thus helping address the coming labor shortage.
- Reduced work hours, flextime schemes, and parental leave would also allow husbands and fathers to spend more time with their wives and children, strengthening family relationships. Increased husband availability to help with child-raising would help raise the birthrate. And to the extent that weak or broken family relationships contribute *hiki-komori*, *toukou kyohi*, domestic violence, and rising divorce rates, these problem areas would be positively impacted.
- Finally, if work hours were reduced – by law or by company policy – employee productivity would rise because workers would need to finish their work in a limited amount of time and would therefore find ways to work more efficiently. The case of increased labor productivity in British companies resulting from reduced work hours and the adoption of WLB-promoting policies in the 1990s is cited as evidence in support of this argument, as is a study by Fujitsu Research that found Japanese firms ranking high on a set of WLB-related measures significantly outperform firms ranking low on the same measures.⁴⁰

In the 2000s, the Japanese government began to actively promote work-life balance as a way to help address the problems outlined above. In particular, several government agencies have embraced the idea that improved WLB can help halt population decline by changing the situation where women of childbearing age feel they must choose between motherhood and having a career. The centerpiece of government initiatives is Japan's "Work-life Balance Charter," signed in December 2007 by Chief Cabinet Secretary Nobutaka Machimura, head of a government task force including academics and representatives from management (Keidanren – the Japanese Business Federation) and labor (Rengo – the Japanese Trade Union Confederation). The charter stresses the importance of achieving a better balance between work and life in Japan, where many company employees "are overworked to the point of exhaustion and are unable to spend enough time with their children or care for ailing parents." Specifically, the charter calls for:

- increasing female (age 25-44) participation in the workforce from 64.9% in 2007 to 69~72% by 2017;
- increasing senior citizen (age 60-64) participation in the workforce from 52.6% in 2007 to 60~61% by 2017;
- cutting in half the number of people working 60 or more hours a week by 2017 (from 10.8% of workers in 2007);
- increasing to 100% workers' taking of entitled paid holidays by 2017 (from 46.6% in 2007);
- increasing the ratio of women who continue to work after giving birth to their first child from 38% in 2007 to 55% by 2017;
- increasing take-up of maternity leave from 72.3% in 2007 to 80% in 2017;
- increasing take-up of paternity leave from 0.5% in 2007 to 10% in 2017; and
- increasing the average amount of time husbands spend on housework

and childcare from an hour a day in 2007 to 2.5 hours a day by 2017.⁴¹

The government has also launched a “Change! Japan” campaign and website to explain and promote WLB.⁴² The site outlines the benefits of WLB, provides information on WLB-related events and survey data, and provides examples of WLB-promoting efforts and measures taken by regional organizations, Japanese companies, and foreign companies and organizations.

Is Japan Different? The Meaning of Work, and Other Cultural Factors

As elaborated above, increasing numbers of Japanese are dissatisfied with their current work-life balance and desire to improve it; many Japanese companies have introduced WLB-friendly HR policies, such as flextime, parental leave, and child-care support; and the Japanese government and other organizations are actively promoting WLB as a means of addressing health issues, social problems, low productivity, and population decline. Yet it seems that little progress is being made in rebalancing the equation toward less work and more “life,” and in ameliorating the problems that poor WLB creates or exacerbates. This raises two questions: “Why?” and “Is Japan different?” To what extent is Japan similar to other nations, in that improving work-life balance is a difficult undertaking anywhere? To what extent is Japan different, in that there are cultural or other factors at work that make achieving work-life balance more elusive than it is in other nations? The remainder of this paper attempts to answer these questions.

Similarities among Countries

Certainly, much of the difficulty of attaining better work-life balance, for

individuals and for nations, is not unique to Japan. In a paper titled “What do (and don’t) we know about part-time professional work?” Vivian Corwin cites studies by Van Echtelt et al, Dick, and Callan that explore why Europeans work longer hours than they say they would like to and why the availability of family-friendly policies such as flextime does not always translate into high adoption by employees.⁴³ Among the reasons highlighted by these studies are the “time greediness” of project-centered (“post-Fordist”) job design, which pressures (or lures) employees to stay late to finish a project rather than stop at a prescribed time, losing momentum and risking missing a deadline; fear of being seen as unmotivated or uncommitted by colleagues; and workplace cultures and managerial attitudes or imperatives that are less than fully supportive of shorter working hours or family-friendly work arrangements. There is little evidence to suggest these that these factors are less prevalent in Japan than in Europe.

Competitive pressures – at both the firm and the individual level – also help explain why improved WLB is hard to attain. For most Japanese companies, competitive conditions are fierce, both domestically and internationally. Increasingly, the competition is from less-developed nations, where people are happy to work long hours (as the Japanese once were) and the idea of work-life balance is a dream only richer nations can afford. Productivity gains could theoretically allow work hours to be shortened, but these are difficult to achieve and unlikely, most managers believe, to be of a scale that would permit significant work hour reduction without hurting firm financial performance. At the employee level, with job security and pay depending more heavily on individual performance than before, cutting back work hours is a risky business indeed. These pressures would seem to apply in both Japanese and non-Japanese work settings.

Differences

At the same time, however, as anyone familiar with Japan can attest, Japan is in some ways fundamentally different from other nations and cultures, and especially from Western nations and cultures. A survey conducted by the city of Tokyo on the topic of work-life balance reveals some of those cultural differences. Respondents who indicated they were unenthusiastic or pessimistic about the prospect of improving work-life balance were asked why. Their top three answers were:

1. The reality of the matter is that it would be very difficult to achieve.
2. When there is an increase in the number of people who work putting priority on their own convenience, this causes trouble for others in the workplace.
3. Housework and raising children should be women's work.⁴⁴

The first answer reflects a Japanese tendency, seen in the often-heard phrase *shikata ga nai* ("It can't be helped" – mentioned above), to accept and endure things as they are ("reality") rather than to actively push for change. This makes it easy to say: Yes, better work-life balance would be nice, but it's unrealistic to think that it could actually be achieved. The same sentiment shows up in a 2006 Cabinet Office white paper which reported that 36% of men surveyed said they would take parental leave if possible but that doing so was "unrealistic."⁴⁵

The second answer reflects the well-known Japanese emphasis on the group (vs. the individual), and on harmony and team spirit. Japan scholar Edwin O. Reischauer writes: "Cooperativeness, reasonableness, and understanding of others are the virtues most admired, not personal drive, forcefulness, and individual self-assertion."⁴⁶ Thus Japanese, to a greater extent than Westerners, take into account the negative effect on colleagues and on

workplace harmony of actions that would prioritize personal interest over work considerations.

The third answer, so politically incorrect in the West that few would dare utter it, shows that the traditional view of men as breadwinners and women as homemakers is alive and well in Japan, even if weakened compared to a generation or two ago. Bolstering the idea of fixed gender roles is the high value that Japanese place on specialization itself; devoting oneself to a single pursuit or role is generally viewed quite positively, while spreading one's efforts over multiple pursuits is not.⁴⁷ These values continue to act as a brake on the efforts of women to pursue work careers (especially after having children) and of men to be more involved at home, and on the effectiveness of WLB policies designed to enable and support such efforts.

But perhaps the greatest cultural difference impacting work-life balance in Japan, versus that in other countries, has to do with the meaning of work itself. The term "work-life balance" posits work and life as opposing forces that must be balanced off against each other. But what if work is life? Not just for workaholics, which make up some proportion of any population, but for a nation? To say that Japanese workers believe work is life overstates it, but it is clear that in Japan work occupies a higher, and different, place in the scheme of things than it does in the West. Work is how one earns a living, of course, but it is also more: it gives meaning to life and constitutes a central part of one's identity to a degree not often found in other countries. This can be seen, for example, in Japan's popular culture; countless *manga* (Japanese comics), *anime* (animated cartoons), and TV dramas revolve directly around work, with protagonists devoting their lives to becoming good office workers, bosses, sushi chefs, architects, tofu makers, shoe salesmen, bodyguards, money lenders – you name it. It is also reflected in work hours. To a greater extent than in other cultures, long hours spent on

the job are not viewed as time taken away from one's personal life; they are a valuable and meaningful part of life. Work is not time taken away from self-actualization; it is self-actualization. This observation is supported by an eight-country investigation by the Meaning of Work International Research Team which found Japan to rank highest in individuals' ideas of the relative importance of work compared to that of leisure, community, religion, and family.⁴⁸ It also calls into question the appropriateness of using words like "better" and "improved" to describe increased time given to non-work activities.

For Japanese men in particular, the workplace also satisfies the human need for social life and membership in a group – of special importance in a group-oriented society like Japan's. To again quote Edwin O. Reischauer:

A job in Japan is not merely a contractual arrangement for pay but means identification with a larger entity – in other words, a satisfying sense of being part of something big and significant. ... There is little of the feeling, so common in the West, of being an insignificant and replaceable cog in a great machine. Both managers and workers suffer no loss of identity but rather gain pride through their company, particularly if it is large and famous. Company songs are sung with enthusiasm, and company pins are proudly displayed in buttonholes.⁴⁹

A Japanese professor who has lived in the West makes these observations:

In the West, a clear distinction is made between work and life. But in Japan, it's much more blurred. For many Japanese men in particular, work *is* life. And they *enjoy* work. For male company employees, the company is their home; their actual house is a sort of "sub-home." That's why they are in no special hurry to return home from work; they

enjoy the camaraderie with colleagues, whether in the office or going for drinks after work.

Japanese female employees are actually more like Westerners in this sense; for them the workplace is less like “home,” and they prefer to return to their real homes early rather than lingering at the office or going for drinks at the end of the workday.⁵⁰

The same professor describes a situation he experienced that illustrates the different approaches of Westerners and Japanese toward work. Thirty teaching staff at a Japanese university had one week scheduled for the marking of a large number of student exams. Around twenty of the exams markers were Japanese; the other ten were North Americans and Europeans.

All the Westerners arrived on time on the first morning, while the Japanese straggled in, many arriving 30 minutes late or more. The Westerners went right to work, working alone and with very little talking. The Japanese took a more leisurely approach, and spent a lot of time chatting as they worked. The Japanese also worked together more; if someone finished a batch early, he or she would help someone else finish theirs. As a result, by day three the Westerners had finished all their marking and didn't show up any more. The Japanese took the full five days to finish their marking. But one interesting thing was that the Westerners made many more mistakes in the marking; the Japanese took longer to finish but made very few mistakes.

Is Japan different, then, when it comes to work-life balance and efforts to “improve” it? The answer is Yes. Culture does matter. While the broader dimensions of Japan's work-life balance movement mirror those in Western countries, important differences are found in the actual work-life choices of

Japanese men and women, and in the influencers and outcomes of those choices. The generic model (Figure 1) developed from this investigation has, I believe, broad applicability to nations and cultures other than Japan. But the specific economic, social, and cultural factors that shape individuals' work-life choices differ greatly from country to country, producing outcomes, both "ideal" and "actual," that also differ across nations.

The Canadian Mental Health Association defines work-life balance in this way: "Achieving work/life balance means having equilibrium among all the priorities in your life – this state of balance is different for every person."⁵¹ It may be different for every country as well.

Notes

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