





The dark side of diligence

Scratch beneath the surface of Japan's economic success story and you'll find a tough work culture, where neither failure nor dissent is allowed

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It's Goidō train station, on a weekday morning. This is the time when columns of overcoat-clad office workers dutifully walk through the concourse of a station serving a satellite town before boarding trains which – with split-second punctuality – will deposit them in Osaka, a teeming mercantile city, and the heart of Japan's second metropolis.

Many of these workers enjoy good salaries, and decent workplace conditions. Some, though, will face a full working day, topped up with hours of compulsory overtime. The 

individuals who depart Goidō on the 7.15am train may not see their satellite town again until 11pm.

In certain lines of work, danger and the risk of death are occupational hazards. A soldier knows the nature of the job before signing up; a deep sea diver goes into the sea, aware of the risk to life and limb. But the Japanese word *'karoshi'* recognises workplace mortality in what is ostensibly safe, white-and-blue-collar work. Put bluntly, it translates as death by overwork.

In December 2015, Matsuri Takahashi, an employee of Dentsu, Japan's largest advertising public relations company, jumped to her death from her Tokyo office. She had worked an astonishing 105 hours of overtime in October 2015. Such was the controversy around her death that Dentsu's president, Tadashi Ishii, resigned.

Clocking up the hours

Unfortunately, Takahashi will probably not be the last Japanese who works herself to death. Florian Kohlbacher, director of the Economist Corporate Network, North Asia, says: "In an international comparison, working hours in Japan are among the longest. Generally speaking, people tend to be diligent and hardworking. They are assigned a task, and they make a real effort to do it. In Japan, you are evaluated by how much effort you put into

JAPAN: THE FACTS



Sources: The World Bank - data.worldbank.org/country/Japan,
Worldometers - www.worldometers.info/world-population/japan-population,
Grant Thornton - Women in Business 2017

something. It is not necessarily about the outcome, it is more about the fact that you are working hard and trying, putting an effort into something."

I spoke to a retired engineer in Furuichi, another one of Osaka's satellite towns. He said: "The prosperity of Japan depends on the sacrifices of the workers. That is common sense. Japan lost the war [World War II], so after the defeat, we knew we had to work harder than anyone else."

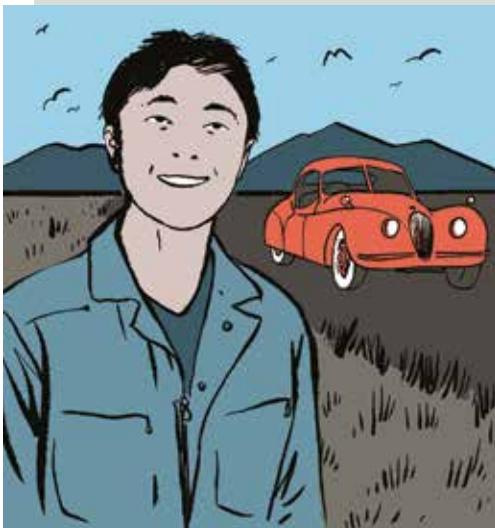
Referring to the Japanese asset price bubble in the 1980s, he added: "Before the bubble, staff would take a holiday with their manager. Today, this is not true. People are happy just to work for a prestigious company."

The engineer also said that, in the past, an employee, in good faith, could share a joke about their job. Not now. It is what you are seen to do, not the actual performance of the job that matters. As the engineer explained frankly: "It is a terrible system based on flattery, not performance."

In Japan, there are 16 national, or public, holidays. Masashi Kurosawa, associate professor in organisational studies and corporate strategy at Kobe Gakuin University, explains that a worker can also expect to get ten days' discretionary holiday per annum. But there is a grey area in that a week, with its seven days, is just that. Week-ends are not, as they are in the UK, regarded as automatic holidays.

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The story of the small businessman



Kenjiro Imanishi lives in Kanmaki, a small town some 15 miles to the south-east of Osaka. In early spring 2017, he wound down his sports car sales company, which he had established in 2004. The vintage cars he sold, he says, are becoming less popular with buyers, and it is proving increasingly difficult to source the right cars. Imanishi worked from 10am to 6pm, six days a week. His two staff, both fellow mechanics, worked the same hours. "This is normal or better than other jobs," he explains.

In Japan, Saturdays and Sundays are not automatically considered as holidays. So Imanishi's staff worked weekends. Wednesday was a holiday, as was the first Tuesday of the month. The mechanics were also given an extra day's holiday each month if they

were participating in a car-racing event. Years ago, as a young mechanic, Imanishi worked some overtime hours. Saying "no" has not traditionally been an option within Japanese culture, he reveals.

Speaking about the Japanese work culture in general, he says: "People do the same things as others, work overtime, and so they cannot say no. It is different from loyalty; it is forced loyalty, because there is no choice."

The irony, as Imanishi explains, is that many Japanese workers do not work to their full capacity, or they work inefficiently during normal hours. If they did, there would be no need for overtime. "People work slowly, and waste time, so they need to work overtime."

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The story of the proud office worker

A 39-year-old Japanese man, who chose to remain anonymous, explains what his job entails: “I work at a bio venture company. One focus of Abenomics is extending the healthy lifespan in Japan and improving people’s overall wellbeing. I have worked for the company for five years and my job is to make sure that it runs properly.

“As a full-time employee, the official hours are nine to six, but I never go home at 6pm. The salary is yearly, so once a year a contract is drafted and signed. The contract contains details regarding overtime, but overtime is included in the yearly salary. If you show results, you can negotiate higher.

“This is different for part-time workers or contract workers. They all get paid by the hour. If you are a full-time employee, it is not about the [set]

hours. It is expected that employees will work for longer than their officially stated hours.”

This office worker usually goes to work on Saturdays, but Sundays remain sacrosanct – a treasured day off.

Does the job tire him physically and mentally? He says: “I overcome my mental and physical exhaustion through willpower. I don’t think working is the cause of my health problems. But yesterday morning I did throw up. I then went to work as normal.”

He adds: “Honour is definitely connected to the Japanese working culture. I cannot speak about the long working hours on behalf of all Japanese people, but for me, the working culture is a source of pride.”

Note: The author would like to thank Benjamin Perry for conducting this interview and providing a translation.



Illusion of happiness

Japan has what is seen as a ‘high context culture’. The UK is the opposite – low context. In a nutshell, this means that Japanese people – you could describe it as expediency – tend to smile and declare that things are all well, even if they are not. Confrontation, under any circumstances, should be avoided.

When I go to the convenience store in Japan, known as the ‘*conbini*’, the staff shout “*Irasshaimase*” – “Can I help you?” as the door opens. A Westerner arriving here for the first time would be amazed by their energy and attentiveness. But with time, you understand that these staff members are just going through the motions – they *must* behave in this super-energetic way. On the outskirts of Osaka, such workers are only paid around £4 an hour.

Tellingly, Japan was ranked in lowly 53rd place on the *World Happiness Report 2016*.

Julie Kimura, an associate professor at Mukogawa Women’s University, in Hyogo, western Japan, explains how she knows a university where research students, working in science, actually sleep on futons in rooms next to the laboratory. The idea being that the students – in order to

IN JAPAN, YOU ARE EVALUATED BY HOW MUCH EFFORT YOU PUT INTO SOMETHING

appear diligent – will stop their work only when their lecturer goes home. They will then sleep near their workplace. The next day, the students will wake up and walk the short distance to the laboratory.

It is this need to be seen to be doing the right thing – the idea of working hard – that sits at the core of the Japanese work culture. At the same time, there is a culture of silence. The more that I researched the Japanese work environment, the more unassailable was the wall of silence that confronted me.

Dentsu did not respond to my email asking what changes, if any, the company had implemented after Takahashi’s tragic death. A Japanese website, not connected to Dentsu, hosts what is referred to, sardonically, as the ‘Most Evil Corporations’ award, which publicises Japanese firms that mistreat their staff. I also contacted them, in a bid to find out more about the website and the companies it highlights – yet I did not get a response.

Japan clearly has a problem with its working culture, but it is not a problem that anyone wants to discuss. ■

Tim Maughan is a business journalist based in Osaka, Japan