

# The importance of talking about nothing

Covid-19 is forcing abrupt change on Japanese office life and traditions

BY TOM FEILING

In Japan, the coronavirus pandemic is making teleworking “the new normal” for millions of Japanese workers and forcing the government to question the value of some of the country’s archaic working practices.

Long before the pandemic, the possibilities afforded by FaceTime chatting and Zoom conferencing was easing the transition to teleworking. The Japanese government has been pushing companies to switch to remote working for some time, in the hope that the offer of a better work-life balance will encourage more women and elderly citizens to enter the workforce.

Until the coronavirus forced their hand, Japan’s corporate behemoths paid lip service to teleworking but didn’t actually do much to facilitate it. Last November, the government gave them another push in the run-up to the Olympics, which were scheduled to open in Tokyo in July but have been postponed, hoping that teleworking would help free up the city’s train network for an anticipated flood of spectators. Again, big companies nodded along and quietly ignored the government’s suggestions.

But nothing steels the nerves like a fright. In April, with the country gripped by fear of the coronavirus, a survey conducted by the Japan Business Federation, or Keidanren, that found that two thirds of its member companies’ employees were working from home. On May 14, the day the coronavirus-induced state of emergency was lifted in Tokyo, Keidanren advised its members to make the switch to teleworking permanent.

This time, Japan Inc. was all ears. In early July, Fujitsu announced that it would reduce its office space by half, set up smaller hubs around the country and make teleworking the new normal for the company’s 80,000 staff in Japan. Hitachi quickly followed suit, announcing plans to enable half of its 33,000 employees in Japan to work from home.

Not everyone is happy with the switch to teleworking. Japanese working culture runs on the idea of teamwork, and the typical office worker is at constant risk of being interrupted by zealous micromanagers and pointless meetings. Those least happy with the switch to teleworking tend to be middle managers in team-oriented workplaces, who are reluctant to let their underlings work from home, for fear that they will slack off.

Yet companies are finding that teleworking is actually good for productivity. Chihiro Oyama, 37, is in charge of human resources development at NTT Data Corp. in Tokyo. She starts work at home at 7am and works until noon, before spending the rest of the afternoon with her child. “After I got the hang of it, I was able to achieve the same results as when I was at work,” she told Kyodo News.

Ms. Oyama says she makes efforts to actively communicate with her co-workers on days when she goes into the office and also has frequent inter-

actions with them online, but “it is hard to have conversations that are about nothing online”.

Unfortunately, “having conversations about nothing” is at the heart of office life in Japan. Contrary to the country’s ultra-modern image, labour productivity is relatively low. “The drive toward productivity is basically a drive toward a sorting of individuals based on ability,” Hiroshi Ono, a professor of human resource management at Hitotsubashi University Business School, told the *Japan Times*. “I think you’ll see more of ‘Hey, this company can actually survive without 10 percent of its staff’—the dead weight. It will be easier to see who those people are.”

Middle managers aside, working from home is proving popular with most employees. After Calbee, a maker of snack foods, announced an indefinite extension of its teleworking policies, an internal survey found that almost two-thirds of staff welcomed the decision and had no desire to go back to office-based work.

Still, many of them have lingering doubts about working unsupervised. In April, recruitment consultancy Persol asked teleworkers how they felt about the new way of working. A majority said they preferred it, but 28 per cent were concerned that their bosses and colleagues might think they were slacking off.

As teleworking becomes the new normal, some companies are starting to move out of the capital. Public broadcaster NHK has reported a spike in cancellations of office leases in central Tokyo as companies opt for smaller workspaces.

Tokyo-based start-up Overflow operates an online financial planning service. The company’s office lease was up for renewal in July and 34-year-old founder Yuto Suzuki was thinking of moving to a larger space. But when coronavirus cases started to rise in March, he decided to take the company completely online instead.

Most of the company’s 270 employees were freelancers and were already working from home, so a physical office space made little sense. “Think about the millions of yen in upfront deposit and the monthly rent we would have had to pay,” he says. He now works from his flat, where overheads and the threat of infection are much less of a worry.

With more people working from home, and more companies moving out of Tokyo, or moving entirely online, young workers are starting to wonder why they spend half their salaries on shoebox-sized apartments in central Tokyo. Before the pandemic, many of them fantasised about moving out of the city and prioritising good health and a less stressful lifestyle but found themselves tied to office work by the need to make a living.

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Office workers in face masks during the Osaka rush hour in June this year

spacious, and nature is closer to hand. For many of them, the office has already become a place to go two or three times a week, partly for face-to-face meetings and partly to appease their managers. They spend the rest of the week working from home, or one of the co-working spaces that have sprung up around suburban train stations.

As remote working takes root, definitions of work, office, and home are becoming hazy. Once people start working from home, it becomes harder for them to believe that they *belong* to the company they work for. Loyalty to one's company has been growing weaker as lifetime employment becomes rarer. Both are casualties of the restructuring that took place after Japan's bubble economy popped in 1992. While company loyalty is still highly prized, the switch to teleworking looks set to further loosen the ties that bind worker to company.

The switch to teleworking is disrupting other aspects of white-collar life too. Take the long-standing custom of using a *hanko*, or personal seal to verify and approve documents. Japanese office culture is still surprisingly reliant on paper; documents flow from desk to desk, and even employees with a tangential relationship to the work described in them are expected to add their stamp of approval.

The *hanko* has been blamed as an impediment to working from home, with many employees complaining of having to travel to the office just to stamp a document. At the end of April, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe instructed his ministers to review the use of *hanko* in government. The same day, Hiroaki Nakaniishi, the head of Keidanren, called the use of *hanko* "nonsense".

Yet even the most tech savvy companies are finding it hard to shake the *hanko* habit. Line, the company that developed Japan's most popular chat app, also designed an app that allows users to seal documents with a digital stamp. Its employees no longer use *hanko* to sign off internal documents, but they still have to make the occasional trip to the office to stamp documents required by the government or other companies.

No doubt economically efficient business practices like electronic signatures and Zoom meetings will eventually become the norm. But not everyone can switch to teleworking. Large corporations might be realising that the conventions that govern white-collar life—fixed office hours, "presenteeism", zealous micromanagement, and the use of *hanko*—are neither necessary nor productive, but they make up only 30 per cent of the economy.

The other 70 per cent is comprised of small and mid-sized businesses, many of which are distinctly technologically challenged. Some offices still rely on fax instead of email and many have out-of-date IT systems. Many homes lack high-speed internet connections and not all laptops have web cameras, which leaves employees unable to attend Zoom meetings.

But the bigger obstacle is Japanese corporate culture. For the myriad small companies embedded in small towns across Japan, personal contact is everything. Noriyuki Hosoi, a 60-year-old manager at a construction company, is required to make weekly business trips to Yamanashi prefecture in central Japan to oversee repair work on a block of flats. As he explained to the *Asahi Shinbun*, "Sales staff win clients' trust by meeting them in person and showing them who they really are. I know I'll have a lower risk of infection if I work from home, but small companies like ours can't afford to switch to such a work style."

If Japan's entire business culture has to abandon years of tradition in order to survive and flourish in a post-pandemic world, many economic modernisers will say "the sooner, the better". But the real price may be social, rather than economic. With fear of infection all-pervasive, fewer people are going out drinking, and many restaurants are only offering take-out meals. For many young people, city living was solitary and atomised even before the pandemic hit. Without offices to go to, what will draw them out of their online, social media bubbles? The population is already shrinking by 500,000 a year. The last thing a country so little given to procreation needs is more housebound, socially awkward, sexually unengaged technophiles. ■