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# **The Working Condition of Japanese Workers: The Implications of the Change of Japanese Companies' Labor Management Policy for Employees' Working Style and Private Life**

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## **Introduction**

In spite of their high performance, Japanese companies have been blamed for causing their employees to get involved too broadly and deeply in the company. *Karoshi* (death caused by overwork), *Kaisha-Ningen* (company man), holiday working, overtime work without pay, not taking regular leave, frequent formal and informal meetings among company members, which are implicitly compulsory in many cases, all these can be raised as examples of such involvement.

Many researchers have pointed out that this kind of broad and deep involvement is to some degree caused by workers' voluntarism. The main reason for this involvement has been attributed to the long term relationship between employee and company (Iwata 1977, Sato 1993). However, since the collapse of the so called 'bubble economy' around 1990, Japanese companies have been actively changing their labor management strategies. In the past labor management was group oriented, presupposing a long term relationship between employee and company. Now, Japanese companies put more weight on individual based evaluations and they no longer guarantee life term employment for all their regular employees. Some researchers say this change signifies a drastic change in Japanese labor management, which will make it very difficult to expect employees to be as broadly and deeply committed to their companies as they have been until now. Employers seem to be more optimistic in this respect, saying that the current change in labor management will result in more respect towards employees' individuality and

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their personal life.

However, if we look at recent statistical data showing how Japanese workers are working in their companies, we realize workers' broad and deep involvement in the companies has not disappeared. On the contrary, we can see it is still widely found and there are even symptoms that is getting more serious.

The aim of this article is to look at how Japanese workers are involved in their companies by reviewing statistical data published by many institutions and to analyze why such broad and deep involvement continues.

### **How and why is labor management changing?**

The main stream of Japanese labor management has been group oriented in the sense that it emphasized the harmony in the organization. Life term employment and the seniority wage system were the two main elements of such labor management. Electric Industry's wage system established in 1946 was one of the most apparent models for it (Hyoudou 1997:56, Kurokawa 1964:192, Kawanishi 1999:1).

However, after the experience of the oil shocks in 1973 and 1979, and the end of the era of high economic growth, employers have gradually enhanced individual based evaluation in the wage and promotion system, although this has not fundamentally damaged the framework of the long term employment and the seniority wage system. This change vitalized competition while still keeping harmony within the organization. Vigorous competition with harmony was said to be the main reason for the competitiveness of Japanese companies (Kumazawa 1997, Iwata 1985). Since the beginning of the 90's the Japanese economy has experienced the collapse of the so called 'bubble economy' and a long period of depression. This long term economic depression has brought vigorous streamlining of companies which resulted in labor management strategy changes. The biggest change concerned the life term employment and the seniority wage and promotion system. When Japanese companies experienced oil shocks and the end of the era of high economic growth, they tried to preserve the framework of life term employment by sending redundant employees to related companies. Although they have enhanced individual based evaluation, it has



not reached the level where it would damage the harmony in the organization. However, since the collapse of the bubble economy Japanese companies have been discarding life term employment and remarkably enhancing the differentiation in wages and promotions among employees.

Nihon Keieisha Dantairenmei<sup>†</sup> (*Nikkeiren* 1995) has argued that a new employment model in this context is necessary. The new model recommends the dividing of employees into three groups. The first group is composed of those employees with skills and experiences accumulated by working in one company for a long period. They conduct the core functions of the company and they are guaranteed a long term employment. The second group consists of employees with professional skills, who have a limited term of employment. They can easily move from one company to another. The third group is composed of employees without professional skills, who have a limited term of employment giving the company flexibility in adjusting manpower. Workers such as clerks, manual workers and sellers belong to this group.

The following table based on *Nikkeiren's* survey (1998) shows the ratio of each employee group in 1998 and the companies' expectation for the changed the ratio in the next three years.

**Table 1) Current ratio of each employee group and their expected change in the next three years**

	First Group	Second Group	Third Group
Current Ratio	84.0%	5.9%	10.1%
The ratio after 3 years	72.7%	11.4%	15.9%

Data: *Nikkeiren*, 1998

This kind of distinction in types of employees is similar to that of J. Atkinson's 'Flexible firm model' in the sense that both of them are devised to increase the flexibility in the organization (Sato 1997). They bring more flexibility in adjusting the amount of manpower and changing the organizational structure according to changes in the economic situation.

<sup>†</sup> Japanese Federation of Employers' Associations

*Nikkeiren* (1995) claims that this change in labor management strategy will result in more respect towards the private life of workers and their individuality. Similar expectations are expressed by many researchers. Iwata (1977:202) states that Japanese workers have an unlimited obligation toward the company in the exchange of the guarantee of long term employment. This implies that if the belief in long term employment vanishes employees will be less committed to their companies. According to Sato (1993:275-276, 291-292) Japanese workers' inclusive contribution to their companies has been based on the belief that their interests coincide with those of their companies, based on the idea of long term employment. This kind of viewpoint implies that if the belief in long term employment disappears, Japanese workers' contribution to their companies will be less than now because their belief in the coincidence of their interests with those of their companies will get weaker. Such viewpoints are commonly based on the idea that Japanese workers' what appears to be self sacrificing contribution to their companies was to a large degree made voluntarily. However, even though we can agree that there has been voluntarism in their contribution, this idea should not lead us to the belief that Japanese workers have had big attachments or love for their companies. Many international comparative studies show that Japanese workers' attachment to their companies is not high, in many cases it is even lower than that of other countries. This finding implies that Japanese workers' "volunteerism" has been conditioned by many pressures in their workplaces, or in their companies (Besser 1993, Hazama 1996:206).

I will further discuss this issue in the following sections.

### **Details of the current changes in labor management and their impact on workers' working style**

Since the collapse of the bubble economy in the early 90's, Japanese companies have been enthusiastic in restructuring their organization. In that process, they have also made many efforts to reduce labor costs. For this purpose, Japanese companies are not only reducing the amount of manpower in total but also making changes in the composition of workers (such as reducing the ratio of regular workers and increasing the ratio of temporary



workers).

*Rengo*<sup>‡</sup>'s survey (1999a) shows that in 1998 the manpower adjustments that unions had experienced in the past year reached a level of 26.7%.

According to the Ministry of Public Management's report of 1999, the ratio of temporary workers (such as part timers and so on) shows a trend of increase and has reached 24.5% in 1999.

Japanese companies are also taking measures to increase competition within the organization. *Rengo*'s survey (1999a) shows 12.4% of all companies had an annual wage system in 1998, which is usually combined with individual based ability evaluation. Generally, companies which have not adopted an annual salary system also have been increasing individual evaluation factors in their wage system (Kumazawa 1997). Japanese workers are expected to compete with each other harder than ever since the beginning of the Post War Era.

In an effort to advertise on the necessity of this change in labor management, employers say the new labor management will give more respect towards workers' individuality and their personal life (*Nikkeiren* 1995). In spite of this optimistic expectation, Japanese workers' broad and deep involvement in the company does not show any trend of improvement. On the contrary, in many cases it shows aggravating aspects.

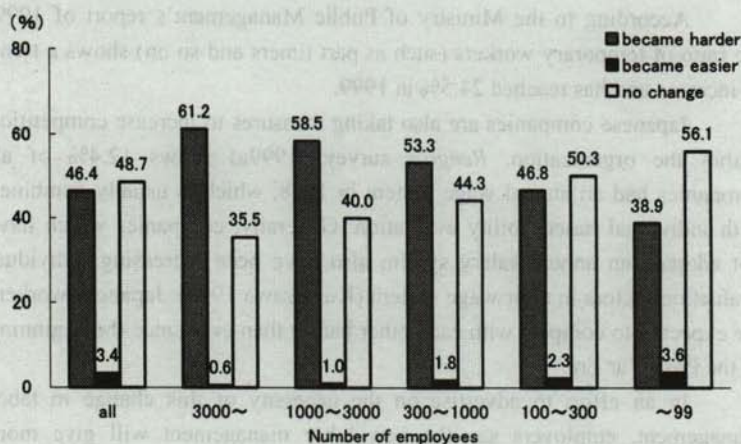
According to *Rengo*'s survey (1999a), the ratio of big companies (more than 1000 employees) that had adjusted manpower in the past 1 year was 36.1%, while that of all companies was 26.7%. In the same survey, 46.4% of all workers said their work became harder after the adjustments, while only 3.4% said it became easier (see Figure 1).

(%)

Category	Harder	Easier	No change	All
Adjusted manpower	46.4	3.4	50.2	46.4
Unadjusted manpower	36.1	1.2	62.7	36.1

<sup>‡</sup> *Nihon Rodo Kumiai So Rengo Kai* (Japanese Trade Union Confederation)

**Figure 1) Opinions concerning the degree of difficulty of work after manpower adjustment made in the past year**



Data: Rengo, 1999a

Signs of aggravation also appear in the range of the task. The boundary of Japanese workers' tasks has been unclear, and under that uncertainty Japanese workers have been required to cover a broad range of tasks. Rengo's survey (1999a) shows the range of tasks is broadening under the current change in labor management.

**Table 2) How the range of the task has changed in the past 1 year**

	(%)			
	Broadened	Narrowed	No change	NA
All	43.6%	1.2%	54.2%	1.0%
Adjusted manpower	64.7%	1.3%	33.5%	0.5%
Didn't adjust manpower	36.7%	1.2%	61.0%	1.1%

Data: Rengo, 1999a

This table shows that the range of tasks has broadened in general,



while that tendency is stronger in companies which had adjusted manpower in the past 1 year.

According to the Ministry of Labor (1999), Japanese workers are taking around half of their regular leave, which is not much different from the past.

**Table 3) Number of the days of regular leave and the actual taken days**

	Average given days by regulation	Actual taken days on the average	Average taken rate (%)
1980	14.4	8.8	61.3
85	15.2	7.8	51.6
90	15.5	8.2	52.9
95	17.2	9.5	55.2
96	17.4	9.4	54.1
97	17.4	9.4	53.8
98	17.5	9.1	51.8

Data: Ministry of Labor, 1999

The same result is also found in overtime working hours. The following table shows that the number of actual overtime working hours in April 1998 amounted to 23.6.

**Table 4) Actual overtime working hours in April 1998**

	1994	1996	1998
0	17.3	14.7	19.4
~10	27.2	24.3	11.4
10~20	21.0	21.4	15.2
20~30	12.0	13.3	13.0
30~40	7.8	8.5	9.5
40~50	4.8	6.4	7.4
50~60	2.6	3.2	4.9
60~70	1.9	1.9	3.2

70~80	0.0	1.0	1.2
80~	1.9	2.5	4.6
N A	3.3	2.9	10.3
Central value	11.8	14.5	18.0
Mean	17.8	20.6	23.6

Data: Rengo, 1999b

According to this table, overtime work in general has recently been increasing. If we consider that the total of regular time working hours in April 1998, as surveyed by the Ministry of Public Management is 153.8 hours, we can say 4.6% workers are working more than 233.6 hours monthly. This is close to 60 hours per week, which is said to be the boundary for *Karoshi*. Furthermore a huge part of the overtime work is supposed to be the so called 'Service Overtime Work (overtime work without payment)'.

In the case of the detachment to a remote place without accompanying family, the number of workers detached in this manner amounted to 314,000 in 1998, which is an increase of 60,000 workers compared to 6 years ago (Asahi Newspaper 1999. 7. 4).

Tamaki (1995.5) who is the head secretary of the *Karoshi Bengodan Zenkoku Renrakukai* (the National *Karoshi* Defense Council) says that since the beginning of 'Karoshi 110', or the *Karoshi* contact telephone channel, in 1988 the number of sales/office workers that has been officially acknowledged as falling down or dying of overworking amounted to 368.

By reviewing the above data, we can say that there is no proof that the change in Japanese labor management is leading to more respect towards workers' private life and individuality. Contrary to such optimistic expectation by employers and some researchers, there are a lot of aspects indicating that workers' dependency on the company and their working condition is getting aggravated. We will talk about the reason why Japanese workers' apparent self sacrificing contribution to the company does not disappear under the changing labor management change in the following section.



## Why does the change of Japanese labor management not result in more respect towards workers' private life?

The change in labor management has been brought about by the initiative of employers. This change consists in paying attention to cost performance rather than the quality of workers' life. The respect towards workers' private life and individuality is just a nominal slogan, the actual purpose of the change is to smoothly restructure the organization to raise the competitiveness of the company.

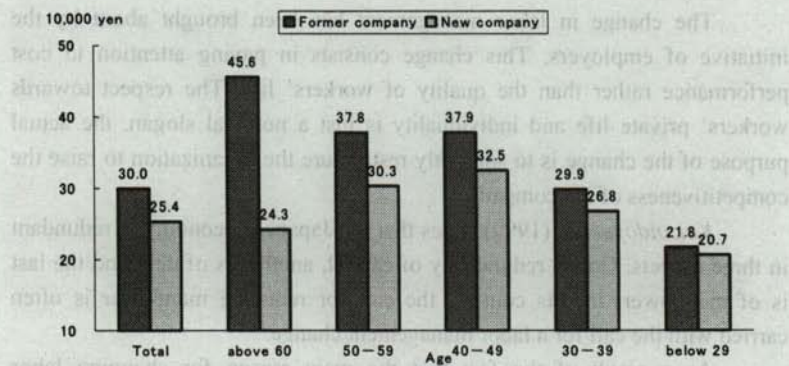
*Keizaidoyukai*<sup>§</sup> (1999) states that the Japanese economy is redundant in three aspects. One is redundancy of capital, another is of debt and the last is of manpower. In this context, the call for reducing manpower is often carried with the call for a labor management change.

As a result of the fact that the main reason for changing labor management policy is to raise the competitiveness of companies, the strong dependency of a worker on one company has not disappeared, rather it has even become more serious. Whereas *Keizaidoyukai* (1999) proposes an equal business partnership between employee and company in the changing labor management, the mobility of a regular worker to another company is still very limited, or even more limited than before. *Jil*<sup>\*\*</sup>'s survey conducted in 1999 shows that it is very difficult to get employed to another company after losing one's job. Also the survey shows that wages tend to drop remarkably when workers move from one company to another.

<sup>§</sup> Japanese Association of Corporate Executives

<sup>\*\*</sup> *Nihon Rodo Kenkyu Kikou* (The Japan Institute of Labor)

Figure 2) The change in the wage after changing companies



Data: Jil, 1999

This result shows that an asymmetric relationship between employee and company is still prevailing in Japanese industrial relations. Under this asymmetric relationship between employee and company, regular workers who still constitute the main part of all workers are induced to contribute to the company as intensively as they have been before. For a regular worker, contributing intensively to his present company for a long term is still one of the most promising ways to get means to fulfill his various needs.

The restructuring of the companies including manpower adjustment is another factor for causing the allotted work for a worker to remain broad and intensive, or even to get broader and more intensive. As we have seen in Figure 1 and Table 2, after the manpower adjustment the work has become harder and the range of the task has become broader. According to Rengo's survey (1999a), 44.4% of the workers who are doing so called 'Service overtime work' frequently says they do it in order to perform the work allotted to them. It means they cannot finish their allotted work within regular work hours because the amount of the work is too much. Under the labor management change to reduce labor costs and to streamline the organizational structure, the tasks allotted to Japanese workers have become more intensive and broader.



The attitude of the trade union is also causing Japanese workers to get involved intensively in the company. In general, Japanese trade unions represented by *Rengo*<sup>††</sup> have placed importance on the safety of employment rather than working conditions in their policies.<sup>‡‡</sup> As a result, the rules for the wage system, working condition and working hours are mainly decided by employers. Furthermore, the wage-task link is decided by an interview, or a discussion between manager and employee. Onodera (1997) calls this a system typical of the Japanese industrial relationship.

Kumazawa (1997:148) states that in the tradition that started at the end of the Second World War, there has been a logic to the guaranty for workers' life, however there have been no logic of relating the wage to the work, and there has been no vision about a desirable work or desirable workplace from workers' side.

As a result, unions can hardly affect the decision and the application process of the rules evaluating workers. Under these conditions, individual evaluation of the ability of each worker leads similar categories of workers to compete with each other. This leads workers doing the same kind of work to deal with employers individually, and it hinders workers' voice getting integrated.

Also, because workers doing the same kind of work compete with each other, attitude evaluation plays an important role in evaluating each person's performance and ability. As a result of this mechanism workers are always required to show enthusiasm at their work, cooperative attitudes towards co-workers and various types of commitment to the company. It can easily result in a competition of getting inclusively involved in a company. Let us see 3 instances of attitude evaluation which is also widely found in other Japanese companies.

#### (Case 1: Nikon)<sup>§§</sup>

Nikon's personnel evaluation system is composed of 4 factors as follows.

<sup>††</sup> Rengo had around 7.6 million workers as its members in 1999, which is 61.6% of all organized workers.

<sup>‡‡</sup> It is partly the result of the conflicts in the industrial relationship from the past.

<sup>§§</sup> Nkkeitenn Shokumubunseki Center (1995. 10)

- ① Accomplishment evaluation
- ② Attitude-at-work evaluation
- ③ Ability evaluation
- ④ Level promotion test

Attitude-at-work evaluation has 5 criteria. They are diligence, discipline, willingness to raise the quality and the quantity of work voluntarily, responsiveness at work and contribution to team work/ adjustment (cooperation) with other departments.

**(Case 2: Sumitomo Shoji)<sup>\*\*\*</sup>**

Sumitomo's personnel evaluation has 3 factors.

**(Table 5) The weights of evaluation factors for each types of employees**

	General employees Level 1	Managers Level 4-6	Managers Level 1-3
Ability for the job	60	30	20
Attitude at work, degree of efforts	30	20	10
Professionalism	-	30	40
Accomplishment at work	10	20	30
Total	100	100	100

**(Case 3: Toshiba)<sup>\*\*\*</sup>**

Toshiba has 3 criteria for evaluation for increasing payment and deciding bonus. They are accomplishment, attitude, ability. 'Attitude' includes sincerity, efforts, enthusiasm, cooperation and so on.

Also, the fact that the works are done by groups rather than an individuals in Japanese companies, resulting in the range of the task for each workers to be unclear and broad, leads attitude evaluation to be important. Because works are done by groups it is difficult to discern how much a person has contributed to the company. Attitude evaluation plays an important role in solving this problem. Under attitude evaluation system, workers are motivated to show their attitudes such as willingness to contribute to the company and to cooperate with other workers, enthusiasm at

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Nkkeirenn Shokumubunski Center (1996. 4)

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Nkkeirenn Shokumubunski Center (1995. 9)



their work, expressed loyalty to the company, efforts to better perform their works and so on. In this sense, attitude evaluation functions as a merit system and a sanction system at the same time in motivating workers.

Also, besides the formal sanctions coming from attitude evaluation system, informal sanctions in the workplace play an important role in inducing workers to cooperate with each other. Cooperation is an implicit rule in the workplace (Uemura, 1982:143~144). The two facts, namely that the range of the task is unclear and broad, and that workers are expected to cooperate with each other also helps the company keep labor costs low because through these two factors the company can minimize redundant manpower. Also these two factors raise the performance of the work group since workers learn to perform better when some members are absent. This can happen because they do not input supplementary manpower when there is an absentee. Members of a work group cover the vacancy themselves. Through this mechanism, Japanese workers exhibit high adaptability in the face of the reduction of the manpower, raising the competitiveness of the company, with the result of tasks getting broader and harder.

The request for broad and deep involvement comes from a cultural factor as well. As a rule, cooperation and communication among members are requested at Japanese workplaces. These kinds of activities of cooperation and communication which are sometimes formal and in many other cases informal, happen not only in the regular working hours but also after the work is finished. As a regular male worker, to ignore these requests and give priority to his private life is likely to result in not only formal but also informal sanctions by other members. This is not only for the sake of the performance of the company, but also related to cultural factors in Japanese society. According to Tsuda (1976), for Japanese male workers a company has functions as a community. Regardless of whether it is happening out of employees' volunteerism or as a result of the pressure from the organization, Japanese workers' inclusive involvement in companies shows us that a company has a meaning as a community for Japanese workers. Hamaguchi (1982:4~5) states that Japanese companies have 'collectivism' as organizational culture. According to him Japanese collectivism does not imply individual's blind sacrifice for the sake of a group. Rather, it is a belief in the coincidence of the interests of an individual and a group. In view of

this relationship between individual and group, as well as the fact that companies exhibit a community-like character, various desires and motivations of employees are absorbed in to the company.

In this sense, a company becomes a small self satisfying society. Iwata (1985:31) describes this situation as 'a small cosmos.' A *Kaisha-Ningen*, or a company man has a pathological meaning defining workers who are excessively involved in a company. However, this word is also indicative of the general phenomenon that Japanese workers are broadly and deeply involved in a company. A company involves an individual inclusively and satisfies his (in most of the cases, the objects are men) various needs. As this phenomenon proceeds, an individual gradually loses his network outside of the company and finally the company becomes a self satisfying society for him. This organizational culture seems to be causing Japanese workers to continuously get broadly and deeply involved in the company.

## Conclusion

The belief that if the expectation concerning the long term relationship between an individual and a company disappears employees' inclusive involvement will also disappear, should be reviewed. Although a long term relationship between an individual and a company contributes to the attachment of the individual toward the company and it can also support the belief in the coincidence of the interests between an individual and the company, it cannot be the only factor explaining Japanese workers' broad and deep involvement in the company. Contrary to employers' and many researchers' expectations, Japanese workers are still showing broad and deep involvement in the company in a situation in which the belief in the long term relationship is getting remarkably weaker. This fact implies that one of the most important factors inducing workers' inclusive involvement is the structure in which various desires and motivations are oriented towards the company, and also that a worker can fulfil those desires only by following the rules in the workplace or the company. This fact also leads us to the thought that even though a worker can easily move from one company to another, if all the companies around him require inclusive involvement from their



employees, he is never free from the inclusive involvement in the company. In this situation, society as a whole requires him to show broad and deep involvement as long as he wants to work for a company.

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