

# BOSTON COLLEGE

## CENTER FOR WORK & FAMILY

### EXECUTIVE BRIEFING SERIES

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## Work-Life in Japan: The Past is Prologue

Japan is 3rd in global GDP standing, with an economy worth an estimated \$5 trillion in 2009 (CIA, 2010). Low birth rates and rapid population aging, however, are threatening Japanese affluence and forcing discussions of how to transform social norms, the gender division of labor, and government policies that currently limit individual ability to balance work and life. In 2008, the government of Japan launched a work-life balance campaign targeting these demographic, social and labor issues.



The Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW), which is responsible for formulating Japan's work-life policy, declared 2008 to be the "inaugural year" of work-life balance and a cabinet level office was established to promote new policies (MHLW, 2009a). This Executive Briefing will explore the social, cultural, legal, and economic forces at play in Japan's Work-Life Balance initiatives and consider what might be done to support change.

#### Socioeconomic Indicators in Japan

Population	126,804,433
Infant Mortality	2.79/1000 births
Birth Rate	7.41/1000 population
Life Expectancy	82.17 years
GDP Growth Rate	-5.2%
GDP Per Capita	\$32,600
Unemployment	5.1%
Literacy Rate	99%

*Source: CIA World Factbook, 2010*

## I. LINGERING INFLUENCE OF THE PAST ON CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE WORK-LIFE BALANCE DEVELOPMENT

Rapid industrialization, war, and its aftermath gave rise to a developmental state system (Johnson, 1982), in which government promoted an exaggerated gendered division of labor as the template for social relations of production.

This idealized division of labor, with a full-time employed “salaryman” as provider and a wife who concentrates her energies at home upon marriage or childbirth, was accepted as a natural social order and retains considerable influence over individuals’ life course choices. Women were consequently under-represented in the workplace, and men under-represented in the home, neighborhood, and community (Ito, 1996). Nevertheless, as spousal pairs, they supported functional households (Vogel, 1971; Rohlen, 1974).

Japanese men’s identities and social standing continue to be defined by employment. This gender-segregated social strategy won wide respect because it served Japan well. The persistence of pre-industrial authority structures enabled the country to endure rapid industrialization without the social upheavals experienced by other modernizing societies (Goode, 1963). Industrialization usually causes divorce to increase, but in Japan it fell for most of the 20th century, rising toward European levels only since the 1980s (Fuess, 2004).

These historically rooted gender formulations continue to resist change. They are landmarks by which Japanese navigate a course through life.

### Women’s position in society

In contrast to the increased independence of women seen in other industrial nations, Japanese women’s employment actually declined during most of the 20th century (Ochiai, 1997, 17-18). Women accepted the government injunction to be “good wives and wise mothers,” producing and nurturing the increased population needed to provide labor power for industrial growth and colonial adventures (Garon, 2010). Women who worked generally did so only until marriage and/or childbirth. Leaving work at these junctures was customary. Coupled with so-called “lifetime employment” for husbands, women’s “retirement” resulted in the country’s large cohorts of “professional housewives” (Ozawa, 2002).

Overall female employment has risen only 7% since the 1970s, accounting today for about 43% of the labor force. Women of childbearing age make up much of the increase. However, unlike earlier female employment, which tended to be “regular” or full-time, recent female labor force participation is largely part-time, “irregular,” or contract work.

Less than half of employed females are “regular” full-time workers today in contrast to nearly 70% in 1985 (MHLW, 2008, 10). In view of their high levels of education, the under-utilization of women is seen as a major Japanese competitive weakness and evidence of continuing indirect discrimination (Sato, Osawa, and Weathers, 2001).

Married women work to maintain family lifestyles; a bulwark against husbands’ employment instability or falling wages. More women may also be working because they are divorced or single mothers (Ezawa, 2006; Hertog, 2008).

The majority of female workers are *ippanshoku*, a category comprising non-career, lower-paid workers who do general office work. *Sougoushoku* denotes career workers, mostly men. They are subject to transfers, overtime at night, and work on weekends and holidays.

Despite lower wages and poor career prospects, those categorized as *ippanshoku* or part-timers are often swept along and compelled by peer pressure to work like the *sougoushoku* workers. They have limited ability to resist this pressure (Ogasawara, 1998). Japan’s company unions generally represent only regular workers’ interests.

Save for the small number of Japanese feminists, there were few critics of this exclusionary, gendered division of labor. But when the presence of women in higher education and employment began to be associated with lower birth rates and difficulties in child and elder care, the MHLW announced a campaign to get men more deeply involved at home, which provoked a fierce, conservative, male backlash (Kageyama, 1991).

The Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOA) of 1986 attempted to redress gender inequity, but practices, such as hiring women only for secretarial positions and pressuring them into retirement upon marriage, persisted as de facto norms. The slow pace of women’s advancement in Japan is linked to cultural inertia in male-dominated workplaces and weak enforcement of gender equality laws and workplace regulations. Japan recently fell from 98 to 101 out of 134 countries in gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2010).

### Work-life expectations

Due to global economic instability, today’s highly educated Japanese workers anticipate working more and harder, with less guarantee of employment security. Simply having a family, let alone balancing family life with work, is a challenge. In addition, the idea of work-life

balance is not well known. A nationally representative MHLW survey (2009a) of working households found 40% of respondents hoping for shorter work hours and 60% hoping for more personal free time. Yet in smaller firms (less than 100 employees) only about 10% of workers knew of the term “work-life balance.” In larger firms, those with some knowledge of the concept or its implications reached 30%.

Japanese husbands and wives generally expect to have separate, non-overlapping roles, limiting men’s involvement in children’s care or housework. Work-life balance is typed as a women’s issue, making it difficult for men to consider asking for their legal right to take leave or even return home from work before children are asleep.



*The slogan and character for Japan’s WLB efforts. The copy reads, “Point one: Let’s try to change ‘the way we work.’ Change! Japan.” The frog character is a pun: the Japanese word for frog and the word for change are both kaeru. (MHLW, 2009b, 31)*

## II. WORK-LIFE BALANCE AND JAPANESE CORPORATE CULTURAL PRACTICES

The notion “work-life balance” has attracted interest in the context of declining fertility and aging labor force worries (MHLW, 2009b). Yet, even as the decline in reproduction has become news, new production strategies and management styles are receiving even more attention. Japanese management employs images of company as “a community of people organized to secure their common livelihood” (Rohlen, 1974, 14).

### The moral use of time

In Japan, time has long been considered a scarce, collective resource, to be allocated by the heads of families, villages, companies, or the nation for the benefit of the collectivity rather than a personal possession (Smith, 1986). Even in the 20th century, when industrial development and greater wealth enabled greater individual choice, time spent on anything but work suffered from an image problem (Linhart, 1998, 2).

Tokuhisa Tamao (1980, 129) summarized the work-leisure relationship from the start of the Meiji era (1868) to World War II as follows:

Enjoyment for its own sake was frowned upon. This notion, together with the idea that any free time that came one’s way should be used for work, was widely held throughout the country – a mode of thinking that continued, indeed, right up to the Second World War; so that the level of awareness of ‘leisure’ among the Japanese at large was extremely low, and people had little notion of any concept of life extending beyond the one of work.

During industrialization, this traditional attitude was a great advantage, not least because workers shared this orientation. Overtime lured workers, who never demanded shorter hours because doing so would impugn the moral foundation of worker-employer relations and betray commitments to fellow workers (Smith, 1986, 186). Postwar government promotion of individual leisure, especially since the 1980s, has seen some success (Leheny, 2003), but today’s depressed economy is a powerful drag on liberalizing attitudes toward time use. Paid leave use peaked at roughly 60 percent in the 1980s. Today it is less than 50 percent (Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training, 2010).

### Japanese work hours trends

The Japanese government has attempted to reduce work hours since the late 1980s to a target of 1800 hours per year by introducing the five-day week. Various time-use surveys reveal varying results. Monthly MHLW surveys show Japanese working hours declining to near the target of 1800 hours per year. This drop in working hours is the result of the increase in mostly female, part-time work.

In contrast, the Prime Minister’s Office Annual Labor Force Survey show that working hours have declined, but still remain above 2200 hours per annum since 1987 (Morioka, 2007). Analysis of public broadcaster NHK’s national time use surveys reflect an increase caused by unpaid hours. In 1990, full-time employed men aged 20-59 reported working an average of 2625 hours a year. This increased to 2703 in 2000 (Mouer and Kawanishi, 2005, 74-75). Of a full-time workers’ average 408 annual hours of overtime, 246 are uncompensated service overtime (Morioka, 2008).

Work hours show a tendency toward institutionalization of unpaid work, especially for “regular” employees. There is no short-hours option for regular workers (Hisamoto, 2003, 53). Giving workers free discretion over their time appears to increase work hours as workers strive to demonstrate their worthiness for promotion and retention. As the labor market tightens, men who take time off to care for family may be seen as insufficiently dedicated, the next to be downsized.

Nevertheless, corporate cultures differ and some Japanese firms advertise their work-life balance-friendly environment (see below for examples). Still, in most firms, men say that the environment does not permit them to ask for leave. Open office floor plans expose them to all eyes, shaming takes place, heavy workloads and work-group orientation, as well as powerful evaluations, constrain men who want to go home at a reasonable hour (Cole, 1992). Like leisure, work-life balance is not supposed to be an issue for regular male employees. A virtuous man displays his love for his family by sacrificing himself at work on their behalf.

### The Japanese workplace culture

The gendered division of social labor enabled men to practice loyal service, diligence, and team play that

produced Japan’s postwar success. These practices fit famously well with the corporate organizational style in which there were minimal differences between managers and line workers. In-house skill creation and human capital formation were emphasized, and workers could expect steady progress through the ranks as they acquired seniority during long-term tenure. Today, new strategies, such as merit-based pay and extensive use of non-regular, non-career workers increase workplace uncertainty and lead to tensions. Temporary and other non-regular labor now comprises nearly 40% of the workforce, up from 10% in 1982 (North, 2010b). Because many middle management posts have been eliminated, the struggle for promotion and continued employment turns colleagues into competitors.

In addition, the two-tiered structure of “career” and “non-career” tracks reinforces “natural” gender differences. In the new “gender equal” workplace, career women must work like the standard “ideal worker,” that is, like a career man. Furthermore, the older men who run companies often have professional homemaker wives. They cannot see the reality of dual-income Japanese life from their elevated positions.

### Struggle over Overtime as Clue to Japan’s Work-Life Balance Future

Long work hours are the most obvious obstacle to Japanese work-life balance. Unpaid overtime, called “service overtime,” is commonplace.

The Labor Standards Law mandates an 8-hour day and 40-hour week. Nevertheless, a clause permits overtime or holiday work as agreed to by the employer and the workers’ union or their representative. It stipulates that overtime wages be paid.

The only workers not covered by these work hours provisions are “executives.” In Japan, the difference between “executive” and “manager” is often ambiguous. Not receiving overtime pay became a badge of elevated status. Thus the custom of non-payment spread without resistance.

However, *karoshi* (death from overwork) as well as suicides and work-induced depression made workers sensitive about work hours. When workers sue to recover unpaid overtime wages, the workers usually win. Rank is a common point of contention, but employees with high-ranking titles often lack the authority or high salaries of true executives.

To avoid lawsuits about service overtime practices Nippon Keidanren, the employers’ federation, proposed in

2006 that an exemption apply to “white collar workers earning more than 4 million yen [roughly \$45,000] per year.” That excluded 70% of Japan’s white-collar workers from overtime pay.

Workers propose to reduce work hours and raise overtime wages. Although the social effects of raising the overtime rate would be positive, stimulating consumption and shortening work hours, management is firmly opposed.

In 2009 a legislative compromise was reached. The Labor Standards Law now mandates overtime premiums of 50%, but only when overtime exceeds 60 hours per month. The 60 hours per month figure is close to the 80 hours per month standard used for granting workers’ compensation insurance payments to *karoshi* victims’ families. Nippon Keidanren opposed the increase, as did small and medium-sized businesses, which often have the longest work hours. Management still has numerous techniques for extracting service overtime (Weathers and North, 2009). Paired with merit-based pay systems, exemptions from overtime regulation would certainly have strong negative effects on worker health, and work-life balance.

The “gender equal” workplace ironically lacks examples of how men can achieve balance or increase involvement with children. The 1990 collapse of the Bubble Economy and subsequent restructuring reinforced most men’s commitment to their identities as workers. Continued tough economic times have prompted resurgence in the number of women who yearn to escape employment by becoming full-time “professional” housewives (Taga Futoshi, 2006, 144).

Despite the broken covenant of “lifetime employment” and growing disenchantment with corporate life, men’s lives have remained unbalanced, tilted toward work. To the extent that it is balanced at all, Japanese work-life has been balanced on the backs of working women. Government attempts to legislate work-life norms appropriate for an advanced industrial nation wound up reinforcing the idea of work-life balance and leave-taking as feminine (See Table 1). Instead of leaving work early to participate at home, fathers put in more hours, many unpaid, and give up the paid leave they rightfully should take, all for the sake of holding on to regular, full-time employment, the durable sine qua non of legitimacy, social membership, and masculinity.

**Table 1. Percent of Eligible Parents Taking Childcare Leave (1996-2008)**

	Mothers	Fathers
1996	49.1	0.12
1999	56.4	0.42
2002	64.0	0.33
2004	70.6	0.56
2005	72.3	0.50
2007	89.7	1.56
2008	90.6	1.23

(Source: Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2009c)

One pioneer leave-taking father compared men like himself to zoo animals, saying that they were as rare as pandas at first, but later became more like hippos, “of which there is one at just about every zoo.” (Ota, 1998, 99) In 2009 1.72% of eligible men took leave. The government hopes to increase paternity leave takers to 10% of eligible fathers by 2017 (Kyodo, 2010).

**The Child Care and Family Leave Law** is part of an umbrella statute for promoting work-life balance and addressing fertility decline. A law supporting paid leave of up to one year for newborn child care (and elder care) was passed unanimously in 1991 and enacted in 1992. At first, the government guaranteed leave-takers 25 percent of pre-leave salary, and there were exemptions from night work and limits on overtime for parents with young children. Smaller firms were initially exempt, but in 1995 all companies were required to comply. Through a number of revisions in 2001 through 2008, the law limited overtime, increased leave allowance to 40 percent of regular salary, aided small and medium sized enterprises, prohibited employers from discriminating against workers who apply for or take leave, encouraged more men to take leave, raised the ages of children eligible for care, eased limits on number of leaves that may be taken, enjoined employers to consider workers’ parental status when making transfers, and extended maximum leave to eighteen months. In 2010 the effective leave allowance became 50 percent of regular salary (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2009d). Companies that realized their parental leave plans by having at least one man take leave would receive official recognition, which could be useful in recruiting talented workers.

### III. SHAPING THE WORK-LIFE AGENDA

The MHLW collaborates with unions, management, political parties, and the public to draw up work-life plans. The policy debate has been taking place amid employer promoted labor market de-regulation. Private sector employers have focused more on employment stability than work hours or conditions. Employment instability makes family formation difficult, drives workers to compete harder to avoid being demoted to irregular work, and holds down wages.

#### How serious is Japan about work-life balance?

The Work-Life Balance Charter is the cornerstone of Japan’s efforts. In addition to the Charter, the committee of experts, lawmakers, and bureaucrats who drafted it continue to produce an impressive flow of reports and analysis emphasizing the importance of the work-life balance for Japan’s future. The “Priority Fields” are the guiding principles of WLB in Japan:

## 12 Priority Fields

1. Expand women's participation in policy decision-making processes.
2. Review social systems and practices and raise awareness from a gender-equal perspective.
3. Secure equal opportunities and treatment between men and women in the field of employment.
4. Establish gender equality for realizing dynamic rural areas.
5. Support the efforts of men and women to harmonize work with their family and community life.
6. Develop conditions that allow the elderly to live with peace of mind.
7. Eliminate all forms of violence against women.
8. Support lifelong health for women.
9. Promote gender equality in the media.
10. Enrich education and learning that promote gender equality and facilitate diversity of choice.
11. Contribute to the "Equality, Development and Peace" of the global community.
12. Promote gender equality in fields requiring new initiatives.

(Gender Equality Bureau, 2006, 17).

## Work-Life Balance Charter

The Charter aims to help Japan erect a family-friendly future. The audience for the message and institutions for realizing its goals are in the formative stage.

The Work-Life Balance Charter (Government of Japan, 2008) calls for cooperative action based on shared recognition of the problems. "To enable various kinds of care and community participation, as well as to respect the needs of individuals for personal time to live healthy, happy lives, Japanese society must diversify its work options." The Charter enjoins each citizen to take positive steps toward achieving work-life balance.

The Charter's first lines illustrate the overall flavor: "Work supports life, providing joy and reasons to live. At the same time housework, childrearing, and neighborhood relations are also essential parts of life and it is because they are fulfilled that reasons for living and joy are increased."

The Charter identifies 3 problems arising between work and life:

1. Employment instability means people cannot be economically independent.
2. Overwhelmed by work, fatigue of brain and body are likely to lead to health problems.

3. Work is often not compatible with child or elder care, so people are troubled.

The background to these difficulties includes intensified global competition, economic stagnation, and change in structures of production. Amid low profits, companies are asked to think of the burdens associated with increasing productivity not as costs but as "investment in the future."

The lack of time for family, community, and self is a major contributing factor to the declining birthrate and predicted population decline. The need for female and elder labor is growing. Even though more than half of households are dual-income households, ways of working remain as they were when only one spouse worked.

The Charter then sets out a concrete vision of a balanced society.

1. Citizens and government officials will find fulfillment in work, and, in addition to carrying out their work responsibilities, society will afford them diverse choices of lifestyle at home and in the community during middle and old age, as well as during the childrearing years.
2. Concerned parties will work positively together to realize this vision. National and local public institutions will provide important support. There are already corporations leading the way toward work-life balance. It will be necessary for those companies to make further progress and spread the movement throughout the nation.

The Charter is intended as inspiration. It seeks to persuade businesses that they have a moral obligation to change their ways so as to serve the larger national interest. The plan is long-range and the approach is to implement step-by-step revisions to the law. The emphasis is on voluntary compliance, slowly building a normative consensus throughout the society without coercion.

A recent review of Japanese books on work-life balance (Toivonen, 2010) summarizes the state of the political debate as largely cosmetic and directed mostly toward helping women rather than reforming workplace practices or social institutions. These books suggest that "the employment system" is the heart of the problem. That counts as a bold, critical statement in Japan, so some progress is being made, although such gradualism seems altogether inadequate for the task because business is introducing measures that make work-life balance more difficult faster than the government is pushing forward with work-life balance plans.

The working conditions that thwart women's hopes of raising children while pursuing full-time careers necessary

for maintaining a decent standard of living – the corporate culture of long hours, discrimination against lower ranked workers, and lack of labor law enforcement – all of this stands in the way of work-life balance for men, too.

#### IV. BEST PRACTICES

Government offices have made significant progress in implementing work-life balance measures. One initiative that has found acceptance in the private sector is “No Overtime Day.” One day per week (usually Wednesdays) workers do not work in their offices after the end of official hours. The following examples illustrate practices at Japanese firms.

##### **Daikin**

Appliance maker Daikin touts WLB programs as components of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Daikin’s plan supports childrearing by offering flexible hours of employment (introduced in 1992) and employee discretion over how and when some work is performed (introduced in 2005). Childcare leave and support policies help employees with children securely combine work and family life, resulting in low turnover. Only 3.5% of Daikin workers leave each year. The industry average is 14.6%.

The company has worked to promote dialogue about work and childrearing. In 2009, several employees and supervisors participated in “best balance” meetings organized by nine Kansai area firms, where employees discuss work-life balance goals with supervisors.

Daikin prohibits employees from weekend or holiday work and designates one day per week when workers must end work at a fixed time. Daikin offers an array of choices to workers with small children regarding overtime work and business trips, time off to care for sick children, and partial support for paid childcare (up to \$2000 per year). Participation can be extended until children graduate from elementary school. Daikin has reformed its leave system to encourage fathers to take time for childcare and has seen an increase in men taking leaves from one in fiscal year 2005 to 74 men in 2009. These initiatives earned Daikin MHLW recognition as a company that supports childrearing.

##### **Johnson & Johnson**

Since 2002, the Japan chapter of the Johnson & Johnson Women’s Leadership Initiative (WLI) has enjoyed broad support at the five operating companies that comprise its membership. The WLI has provided an overarching affinity group umbrella for employees, and its mission is to provide resources for mentoring, career advancement and work-life balance. The chapter also seeks to optimize synergy between Johnson & Johnson and industry stakeholders

through meetings with hospital physicians on career development, mentoring and role model opportunities for women, and support for work-life balance. The WLI Japan chapter holds several roundtable events throughout the year as well as an annual conference for its members.

##### **Procter & Gamble**

Procter & Gamble (P&G) is another firm that earned public recognition for its concern with “best balance.” With the reform of the Parental Leave Law in June 2010, even fathers whose partners are full-time housewives or are themselves taking leave will be able to take leave. P&G’s effort is spearheaded by “Diversity Managers,” like Makino Hikari, who says, “The system is extremely important, however it is important to create an environment in which workers can use the system. It is a tragic waste for a worker to have to quit the firm for some reason. We think it is better to have a flow where workers can take adequate time away from work as needed so that they can come back and contribute that much more to the company.” (MBS Voice, 2010/06/29)

##### **Shiseido**

Seventy percent of workers at cosmetics giant Shiseido are women. Female employees may take three years childcare leave per child, extended to five years if a second child is born during leave. Leave beyond 18 months is uncompensated so most employees return to work at that point. Remaining employed is important because it is a condition for placing a child in daycare. For those who live in areas with a daycare waiting list, Shiseido has a small daycare facility available at its Tokyo head office for 34 children.

Allowing parents of young children to leave work early is another legally mandated accommodation practiced at Shiseido. Due to the team orientation/ workgroup organization of Japanese workplaces, leaving early burdens remaining workers. Consequently, parents, women in particular, will quit rather than suffer becoming unpopular. Shiseido tries to address this issue by hiring specially trained part-timers to fill in, in the evenings.

##### **Softbank Mobile**

Softbank Mobile allows workers with small children to leave work 2 hours and 45 minutes early and it gives financial help to families. The payments supplement monthly government childcare support allowances of roughly \$140 per child. Softbank makes lump sum payments to encourage additional births, up to a maximum of 5 million yen (over \$50,000) for a fifth child. The firm considers this a way of demonstrating CSR. Softbank also provides men five days of special paid leave that can be taken freely around the time of an anticipated birth.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

Japan's work-life balance efforts are just getting started and remain small in scale. Behind the Work-Life Balance Charter, new labor market structures are already rising, such as institutionalized expansion of irregular worker use. Employer Federation Nippon Keidanren's call for "flexibility" and "diverse 21st century ways of working" could help promote work-life balance if Nippon Keidanren was not also the driving force behind labor deregulation.

At present, acceptance of new ways of working to promote a more balanced approach in private sector firms is most likely to be possible under the following conditions (North, 2010):

1. The firm cares enough and is large enough to afford to establish an environment that promotes work-life balance as a component of corporate social responsibility (CSR) or to make the firm attractive to skilled, white-collar workers, especially women.
2. The worker works individually so that absence neither increases the burden on co-workers nor makes him/her the object of teasing or complaint; or the worker works on a project basis, making it easier to plan time for leave.
3. The worker has already been promoted or established a reputation as invaluable.
4. The worker has a spouse with equivalent income so that leave-taking does not threaten household finances or make female leave the default option.
5. Husband and wife take a gender-free stance, agreeing to share housework and childcare and treat both of their careers as equally valuable.
6. The firm approaches work-life balance from a health and wellbeing standpoint, aiming to reduce stress and increase health among its employees.

### About this Series

Written for an executive level audience, the Boston College Center for Work & Family Executive Briefing Series addresses topical and strategic issues of particular relevance to the current business climate. The series highlights research findings, data trends and best practices in a concise format, aiming to foster action-oriented dialogue within organizations. Each issue features an accompanying PowerPoint presentation that captures key points and includes a section for practitioners to customize and add organization-specific data

### About the Center

Since its founding in 1990, The Boston College Center for Work & Family has been a national leader in helping organizations create effective workplaces that support and develop healthy and productive employees. The Center provides a bridge linking the academic community to the applied world of the work/life practitioner and has three main focus areas: research, membership, and education. The Center is committed to enhancing the quality of life of today's workforce by providing leadership for the integration of work and life, an essential for business and community success.