

Workers urged to knock off early, make babies

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Bloomberg

The Japan Business Federation (Nippon Keidanren) is worried the nation's workers aren't having enough sex.

The group recently urged its 1,632 member companies to start so-called family weeks that give employees more time for playing with the kids and having more children to reverse a declining birthrate. A survey by the Family Planning Association of about 3,000 married people under age 49 shows couples are having less sex because long work days leave them with too little energy.

In a country where people over 65 will outnumber children two-to-one in five years, companies say they eventually won't have enough workers. Japan's birthrate has been falling since 1972 and threatens to shrink the labor force 16 percent by 2030 from 66.6 million workers in 2006, according to the health ministry.

"You must go home early," Nippon Oil Corp. President Shinji Nishio told staff in a speech for the company's two-week family campaign, which ends Saturday. "The dwindling birthrate and the aging population, along with the responsibility of educating the next generation — these aren't just somebody else's problem. We expect all workers' active participation."

At Nippon Oil, Japan's largest refiner, staffers have been forbidden to work on weekends and must get permission to stay past 7 p.m.

Textile maker Toray Industries Inc. and All Nippon Airways Co. are other companies with family weeks this month.

Each evening at 8 p.m. at Nippon Oil's Tokyo headquarters, the tune "When You Wish Upon a Star" blares from loudspeakers. The theme song from Walt

Disney Co.'s 1940 movie "Pinocchio," about a puppet that wanted to be human, is meant to pull at workers' heartstrings and remind them they should be home with the people they love, said Takefumi Koga, group manager of labor relations.

Colleagues took advantage of the extra time off to arrange after-work drinking sessions, but Koga, 45, the father of two girls, said he managed to rebuff the invitations and go home to his family in the suburbs of Tokyo. When he unexpectedly turned up for dinner, his daughter asked him if he was unwell.

"My family and myself felt awkward at first, but it's nice to spend the time together," Koga said. "But I can't go home early every day."

Spending more time at home may make some white-collar workers, known as salarymen, uneasy in a country where long days and short holidays are the norm. Japan's average workweek in 2006 was the third-longest among industrialized countries, after South Korea and the U.S., according to the International Labor Organization, the United Nations agency based in Geneva.

Workers opted to take less than half of their paid vacation last year, averaging just 8.3 days, according to the labor ministry. The word "karoshi" has entered the vocabulary to describe the phenomenon of death from overwork.

"It's a tough challenge for workers, especially the middle-aged ones who have been taught industriousness is the most important virtue," said Dr. Kunio Kitamura, chairman of the Family Planning Association, who gave details of the survey on married couples at a conference last week. "Going home earlier, if they can put it into action, is a way to fix the declining birthrate."

Japanese couples are giving up on sex, according to the report, which will be submitted to the Ministry of Health and Welfare next year.

Of the married couples surveyed in 2008, 36.5 percent hadn't had sex in the previous month, up from 34.6 percent in 2006 and 31.9 percent in 2004, Kitamura said. The couples complained they were too tired from their jobs, or that sex is "boring."

"The advice for sexless couples is to spend more time

together," Kitamura said. "Just being around, even watching TV in the same room, would be a good start."

The country's birthrate, the average number of children a woman has during her lifetime, started falling in 1972, and stood at 1.34 in 2007, well below the 2.07 required for a stable population, according to the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research.

"People are the country's resource," said Rie Sako, deputy manager of the Tokyo-based National Quality of Life Group, which promotes the family weeks at the Keidanren business lobby. "To sustain our standard of living, it's important to stem the contraction in population."

Family weeks are only a first step, Sako said. Leaders of Japanese companies need to get behind efforts to reduce hours throughout the year.

At Nippon Oil, family weeks are just one of the measures the company has introduced to try to reduce overtime, in part to decrease costs and improve efficiency. In October last year the company started a "Sayonara Overwork" campaign, and posted signs in offices listing eight ways to go home earlier.

Like his colleague Koga, Risuke Shimizu, 37, a Nippon Oil spokesman, has had to resist the temptation to drop by a bar instead of going straight home during family weeks, he said. Normally he gets back so late his two young children are already asleep.

"They came to the front door to welcome me home when I came back earlier during the weeks," he said. "It's quite good."

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