

Office weighs less in the work-life balance

But being able to spend more time with family or on oneself faces many hurdles

By SETSUKO KAMIYA

Staff writer

After his son was born last April, Hyogo Prefecture civil servant Akira Hirabayashi decided to cut back on overtime at work. He yearned for more time with little Susumu and also wanted to give his wife, Chie, a chance to return to her teaching job at an elementary school.

The couple began talking about him applying for unpaid parental leave. Luckily, his boss and colleagues supported his request for a year off.

"Having to survive with one income is the biggest challenge, but the experience is priceless," said Hirabayashi, 35, who is currently in his third month of paternity leave and is so thrilled by fatherhood that he posts his daily child-raising experiences on a blog for the world to see.



Akira Hirabayashi holds his 14-month-old son, Susumu, in May, his second month of parental leave from work. PHOTO COURTESY OF AKIRA HIRABAYASHI

Hirabayashi reflects a nascent but growing desire by many in Japan to achieve a work-life balance. More working people are seeking personal contentment by spending more time with their families, or focusing on other activities such as exercise, volunteer work, going back to school . . . or just plain kicking back.

The idea is gaining appeal not only among the masses of bleary-eyed office drones, but within the ranks of policymakers and even some corporate executives as well.

It's something of a revolutionary concept in a culture where overtime is taken for granted and about one in four men in their 30s work more than 60 hours a week.

With such a deeply entrenched work practice, a work-life balance appears like an elusive mirage.

When the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy in April floated the idea of a true five-day workweek, as well as requiring workers to use up paid holiday and halve overtime to achieve a work-life balance, Finance Minister Koji Omi complained that such a measure would make Japan "a country of grasshoppers" — a reference to the work-shy bug in Aesop's fable "The Ant and the Grasshopper" who idles the summer away and finds himself hungry when winter comes.

Hiroki Sato, professor of human resources management at the University of Tokyo, noted how during the 1960s and 1970s, workers, mainly male, famously endured long overtime in a single-minded pursuit of economic growth. Both husbands and wives, whose main role at the time was raising the kids, accepted this route to a higher family income.

But now workers, both male and female, are increasingly placing value on their lives outside the workplace, and management has failed to grasp this despite government initiatives attempting to turn around Japan's birthrate, which for two decades has been on a steady decline, Sato said.

Such measures include the much-touted 1994 Angel Plan mandating improved child care and the 2004 Child and Child-Rearing Support Plan, which urged employers to introduce family-friendly policies to help working parents but

Balancing work, child-rearing

* In Canada, Finland, Norway, Sweden and the United States, women are more likely to hold jobs than they are in Japan, yet are also more likely to have children, according to the OECD.

* Family-friendly working practices can improve morale and productivity. A 2006 Japanese government survey found that male and female adults who described having found a comfortable balance between work and private lives were more motivated on the job than those who hadn't. OECD studies have made similar findings.

* Innovative policies can encourage fathers to share parental responsibilities. Swedish dads increased their use of available parental leave to 17 percent when offered leave tailored specifically to

help working parents, but only in vaguely worded terms.

"If the way people work isn't fundamentally rethought, government support for working women simply won't function," Sato said. "Everybody has finally realized this."

Achieving a work-life balance generally requires a worker to take greater control over fulfilling job responsibilities and attending to personal needs. Employers, for their part, should allow flexible work hours as long as the job gets done. They can also provide on-site child care for working parents and provide efficiency incentives in order to cut overtime.

A glance at how other countries go about attaining a work-life balance suggests Omi's fears of a grasshopper nation may be unfounded.

The United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, Sweden and Germany are all examples of countries with work-life policies in place. Nonetheless, according to the latest research by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, each boasted far higher overall per capita productivity than Japan, which ranked 19th among 30 member states surveyed.

Several Japanese government agencies have in fact embraced, in principle at least, a work-life balance as an important way to stanch the worrisome population decline by reassuring women of childbearing age that they need not choose between motherhood and a career.

Achieving that balance, it is hoped, will especially nudge new mothers back into the workforce, where they can provide

their needs. By comparison, only 0.5 percent of Japanese fathers take available leave.

* Tokyo-based NLI Research Institute in 2002 asked Japanese men why they didn't take more parental leave. Permitted multiple answers, 57.3 percent said, "Someone else could shoulder the burden" — presumably wives or mothers. Other leading reasons given were, "I'm too busy at work" (42.7 percent), "It would inconvenience coworkers" (41.1 percent) and "It would hurt the family purse" (29.0 percent).

* Nevertheless, many Japanese men do express some desire for more family time. According to the Cabinet Office's 2006 white paper on the national lifestyle, 36.0 percent of surveyed men — with and without children — said they would take parental leave if possible but that doing so was "unrealistic." Only 7.4 percent expressed strong interest. (S.K.)

much-needed skills and labor, and pay into the country's strained pension accounts.

In its 2006 white paper, the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare declared, "Helping people balance work and home life has become an issue of ever-greater importance amid the declining birthrate and drop in the working population." By the end of this year, the government plans to unveil its Work-Life Balance Charter, described as an attempt to change the work ethic.

There are still very few Japanese achieving a European-style work-life balance. While there may be more fathers pushing around baby carriages on weekends, Hirabayashi is one of just 0.5 percent of Japanese men taking full parental leave. As for Chie, 27, she is among only 30 percent of women who return to work after giving birth.

In a more experimental vein, however, Ryohin Keikaku Co., which runs the ubiquitous Muji retail chain, last September began an in-house initiative to reduce unnecessary overtime clocked at its headquarters. The chief aim was to enhance productivity while isolating work-flow inefficiencies.

The project is still ongoing, but there are early signs of success. Employees are allowed to stay until 7 p.m. at the latest without express permission from managers, or one hour past the end of the regulation work shift.

Thanks to increased efficiency, some 90 percent make it out on time, said company spokeswoman Takako Akamine.

Other firms are meanwhile taking the unusual step of granting flextime to not only mothers with young children but fathers, too, or allowing workers to telecommute.

Be that as it may, critics say the government itself has fallen short in mandating flexibility, noting this is partly to blame for the fertility rate falling to 1.26 in 2005 from 1.57 in 1989. The figure did bounce back to 1.32 in 2006, but experts attributed that to an improved employment climate and not to any policies.

"Government measures to help women work and raise children have been insufficient," said researcher Yoko Yajima of Mitsubishi UFJ Research and Consulting Co., who focuses on the relationship between gender and demographic trends.

"The problem obviously lies in the way people work."

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