

# What's the right work-life balance?

## The Japanese government and concerned organizations search for the right answers

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Campaigning for "work-life balance" is all the rage in Japan.

Alarmed by the declining birthrate and a looming labor shortage, the Japanese government is pumping money into child-care services so women can keep working full-time after giving birth. It is also urging men to take child-care leave and asking companies to cut overtime so employees of both sexes will not get too exhausted to raise children or nurse sick parents. The minister of population and gender-equality issues, Yoko Kamikawa, is even asking businesses to appoint CWOs, or Chief Work-life-balance Officers, to make "WLB" a top priority.

The government took things even further when it signed the Work Life Balance Chapter in December. Among the 14 numerical goals set (albeit without any penalties for companies that don't meet such goals) are halving the percentage of workers putting in more than 60 hours per week to 5.4 percent by 2017 and doubling the percentage of telecommuting workers to 20 percent by 2010.

Still, despite the promotion of family-friendly policies that should make more people's lives easier, workers themselves seem pessimistic about the chance of these changes actually happening.

According to a survey of 1,080 businesspeople in

**Statistics on work- life balance in Japan**

**41.2 percent:** The ratio of women

mostly nonmanagerial positions taken jointly by the Web site goo Research and online technology news site CNET Japan in February, 45.3 percent of the respondents answered "No" when asked if they thought WLB would take root in Japan, saying working overtime is part of their job. And this was despite almost all of those surveyed having acknowledged the necessity for WLB in their lives.

who support the idea that husbands should work outside their homes and women should stay at home

**49.7 percent:** The ratio of men who support the same idea

**38 percent:** The percentage of women who have continued working after giving birth to their first child

**60 minutes:** The amount of time men with children aged 5 or younger spend daily on housework, child-rearing, nursing of old or sick family members and shopping

**23.5 percent:** The percentage of businesses that offer counseling and other mental health services for their workers

*Source: The Cabinet Office*

Why are they so pessimistic? Comments made recently at two symposiums in Tokyo suggest that people are often more at the mercy of prevailing cultures than of changes in policies.

A March 21 symposium cohosted by the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo and the Japan Women's University, titled "Creating a Second Chance for Women — Helping Mothers Get Back to Work," focused on reintroducing to the workforce women who have left their jobs to have children. At the gathering, Margot J. Carrington, principal officer at the U.S. Consulate in Fukuoka, pointed to "systemic barriers" afflicting women, such as the lack of labor mobility, people who develop skills that are firm-specific rather than portable, and the reluctance of companies to invest in women.

"Unfortunately, I think there are some obstacles that are very systemic and very significant that will prevent (women from returning to work), in spite of a lot of people willing and wanting to make that happen," Carrington said.

At another recent conference, "Family and Work —

Finding Policies for Supporting Family and Work in a Mature Economy," Naoki Atsumi, research fellow at the Economic Research Center at Fujitsu Research Institute, touched on fixed ideas of gender roles — men as breadwinners and women as homemakers — as an obstacle, even among women. He cited his own experience of joining the ranks of the 0.5 percent of male workers who take child-care leave when he raised his child with his working wife.

"While taking the leave last year, I took my son to the park in the middle of the day," Atsumi said at the March 26 symposium cosponsored by the Japan Foundation and the German political foundation Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. "Mothers who had been chatting there stopped talking as we approached. They gave me a look of, 'The poor guy must be out of work. . . . Or has his wife left him?' " Atsumi noted that what really keeps people, particularly men, from taking child-care leave is something intangible, a "kuki (atmosphere)" or psychological barrier against using such leave.

Is there a way out of the conundrum? In the United States, which effectively lags behind all other developed nations in family/work protection policies — with no guarantees for paid child-care leave for fathers and no laws setting maximum working hours — some forward-thinking companies have started taking action.

Connie Dato English, director of alumni career services at the Darden Graduate School of Business at the University of Virginia, told the U.S. Embassy symposium that some companies are exploring the idea of "returnship," in which mothers who have taken time out from work, just like interns trying to ease themselves into a profession, can try out their compatibility with employers on a short-term basis, while proving themselves to the corporate world.

"If you think about it, it's a low-risk way for the company to engage this person," said English, a re-entrant herself. "It's low risk for the re-entrant, and low-risk to the re-entrant's family as well."

On the other hand, in many workplaces, there are not

only people who are dying to get back into work, but also people who can't seem to get enough of the office — even when they are not productive.

To change the minds of die-hard workaholics who make their coworkers feel guilty for pursuing WLB, Fujitsu Research Institute's Atsumi suggested an approach that targets "problem individuals" in companies and tries to change them one by one.

One such individual at a client company of Atsumi's was a high-performing yet inflexible manager who would treat his subordinates' time as his own and expect them to work as long as he did.

"He told me, 'What about work-work balance? That makes me more excited. Ha ha ha!' " Atsumi recalled. (The comment is a pun — "work work" sounds similar to *waku waku*, which means "to feel excited" in Japanese.) "He took pride in his self-destructive style of working, saying he would die happily at work."

So rather than lecturing him about WLB, Atsumi acted deferential, flattering the man's dedication to his work. Then Atsumi enlisted the help of the manager's elderly boss, the chairman of the company, whom he asked to take the workaholic out for drinks.

"I had the chairman tell him, 'You are so valuable to our company, we want you to work for us as long as possible. To raise the sustainability of our company, I want you to work as sustainably as possible, taking good care of yourself,' " Atsumi said. "He finally slowed down after that."

Ultimately, the choice of when, and how much, to work should rest with individuals. Likewise, how and to what degree an employee wants to value nonwork aspects of their life — be it bringing up children, walking their dogs or going on that round-the-world fantasy trek — is something each of us should be able to decide for ourselves and not have the government or academics dictate.

The fuzziness of WLB as a concept — as well as the

difficulty of defining the right balance — may explain why a half of survey respondents reacted negatively to it. But a society in which fulltime employees typically take only half of their allotted paid holidays (46.6 percent in a 2007 labor ministry survey) and 99.5 percent of fathers don't use the paternity leave that the government supports is not a healthy society by any measure.

Hopefully something, whether it's either new institutional policies or a grassroots change in expectations of what a working culture should be, will bring about a better balance of work and life in a country that badly needs it.

### **How to re-enter the work world**

Caroline Fishman Cohen, a keynote speaker at the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo and the Japan Women's University symposium "Creating a Second Chance for Women — Helping Mothers Get Back to Work" is a mother of four and author of the book "Back on the Career Track." She suggests seven steps for how mothers can "relaunch" their careers:

- \* Decide if you really want to get back to work
- \* Learn confidence
- \* Assess your career options, including where and how to work and at what pay
- \* Update your professional and job-search skills using various connections such as past colleagues, college classmates and groups you have worked with as volunteers
- \* Network and market yourself, including updating your wardrobe
- \* Channel family support
- \* Figure out how to handle the job (or find another more appropriate one if you can't)

*Source: [www.irelaunch.com](http://www.irelaunch.com); "Back on the Career Track" (Business Plus; 320 pp.)*

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