

EDITORIAL

Rise of the telecommuters

The number of telecommuters in Japan jumped during fiscal 2008, according to a survey by the transport ministry. Nearly 10 million people telecommuted for eight or more hours per week at the end of last March, up five percentage points from three years earlier, to comprise roughly 15 percent of all workers in Japan. With 46 percent of the workforce telecommuting fewer than eight hours per week, Japan is poised for a potential revolution in the workplace.

Telecommuting can allow many employees a better work-life balance. Workers with young children may particularly benefit. Japan's long commute times, and accompanying stress, could be reduced, concomitantly relieving pressure on overcrowded public transportation. Eliminating the commute for even one day a week could give many employees two or more extra hours of leisure. The flexibility would be relaxing while giving impetus to remaining efficiently on-task during working hours.

Nowadays, the majority of businesses have increased the number of tasks that can be done online or by e-mail. Many of these tasks can be accomplished in different ways with increased efficiency. Outsourcing of other computer work, such as data input and document processing, is, after all, a sort of telecommuting. Businesses can find savings in office space costs.

The structure of many Japanese cities will likely change as well, as work patterns, leisure areas and the flow of people evolve. All that may sound idyllic, but it should also be remembered that Japan has a long tradition of doing business face to face. A face

on a computer screen is no substitute for a human presence. What's more, Japan's workplaces often rely on group efforts, which can be undermined if employees meet less often. The basis of business relations will have to change. Still, long-established in-person trust is an invaluable commodity that should not be discarded in the rush for technological change.

Computers are changing how the Japanese work and live. The only question that remains is whether the changes will pan out as positive or not. An optimum balance will have to be found for businesses to thrive socially and economically in the future.

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