



Japan Fights 'Death from Overwork'

By Stephenie Overman

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Japan is looking for new ways to fight an old danger: "karoshi," the Japanese word for the phrase "death from overwork."

The leading causes of karoshi, a term coined in the late 1970s, include heart disease, stroke, asthma and suicide. Work issues were a contributing factor in more than 2,000 suicides in the country in 2015, according to a white paper from Japan's Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare.

An especially high-profile suicide that year of an employee at Dentsu, a Japanese ad agency in Tokyo, was ruled karoshi. Dentsu's president has since resigned, and the case has been referred to the prosecutor's office.

Since then, the government and private sector have launched new initiatives to combat excessive overtime work, a longtime problem in Japan.

One initiative underway is "Premium Friday," a public-private campaign that encourages—but does not compel—employees to leave work at 3 p.m. on the last Friday of each month. The goal is to reduce long work hours and increase consumer spending by giving people more leisure time for shopping and travel.

The government has advised its ministries and agencies to encourage workers to leave work early on Premium Fridays. Sadayuki Sakakibara, chairman of the Japan Business Federation (known as Keidanren) said the federation was urging its members to participate. Keidanren is the chief private partner in the campaign.

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But only 3.7 percent of Tokyo-area employees left work early to mark the first Premium Friday on Feb. 24, according to an online survey conducted by Tokyo-based marketing firm Intage Inc. The survey found that 5.8 percent of companies with 1,000 or more employees had adopted the policy, while 2.4 percent of companies with less than 100 employees had adopted it.

And after four months "the program still has low participation rate amongst companies in Japan," said Jun Kabigting, chief community officer of the Japan HR Society (JHRS). (www.shrm.orghttp://www.jhrs.org/) "I'm actually not aware of JHRS members who have implemented it or who have [an] official policy about this Premium Friday," he said.

"I think this is really indicative of a larger problem ... Japan is really a work-obsessed country and this kind of mindset is deeply ingrained. It will take a generation or two to change this," said Kabigting, who is also president of HR Central K.K., an HR consultancy in Tokyo.

"At the end of the day, Japan needs to recognize that work/life balance is a personal responsibility—not the responsibility of ... employers [or] the government."

Some companies have devised their own variations of Premium Friday. JFE Steel said that after consulting with their supervisors, employees will be allowed to select at least one day a week to leave work on time, reported the business publication the *Nikkei Asian Review*.

Mitsubishi Chemical Holdings announced that it won't schedule meetings for early mornings or in the evenings, except for necessary communication with overseas offices. The company also banned work e-mail during weekends, the *Nikkei Asian Review* reported.

The Japanese government is taking steps to shame employers that it finds have exploited workers and failed to take corrective measures against requiring mandatory overtime work, despite warnings.

In May, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare published on its website "a list of 334 companies that received warnings over excessive overtime by employees or whose cases were sent to prosecutors for other kinds of labor law violations since last October," *The Japan Times* reported. "The names will remain on the site, which gets updated monthly, for about a year after the ministry's move against the companies, but they will be withdrawn within a year if corrective measures are taken," the ministry stated.

Among those on the list is Dentsu. That's the company where Matsuri Takahashi worked when she committed suicide in December 2015. She reportedly worked 105 hours of overtime in the month leading up to her death.

In March, a government panel's call for revised labor laws that would cap overtime at 100 hours a month was met by protests that the recommendation was not nearly stringent enough.

The cap "fails to provide sufficient minimum protection against long working hours that impair the health of corporate employees. The regulation ... will hardly serve as a guarantee to stop excessively long work hours from causing the deaths and suicides of employees—as it ostensibly sought to achieve," an editorial in *The Japan Times* stated.

"The government needs to take steps to make sure that the planned overtime regulation will be honored," the editorial added. "The prevalent practice of 'service overtime' at many businesses of getting employees to work beyond regular hours without clocking overtime and denying them extra pay makes any such regulation meaningless."

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