
Current Status and Issues Facing Employees of Intermediate Age in the Workplace: From the Perspective of Labor-Management Relations

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This article outlines issues surrounding the workplace circumstances of employees of intermediate age, who act as the linchpin of enterprises' human resources. In Japanese companies there is significant correspondence between age and rank due to seniority-based promotions, meaning that in effect intermediate age (for the purposes of this article, age 35–49) is often synonymous with intermediate rank (i.e. “middle management”). These employees tend to be extremely overworked, and it is predicted that this situation will grow even more severe in the future. Excessive workload may be caused by a shortage of employees of intermediate age, or may arise when there are a sufficient number of employees at this age/rank but an insufficient number of younger workers, or even when there are more employees of intermediate age than required, but an insufficient number of both younger and middle-aged or older workers. Under such circumstances employees of intermediate age must handle tasks that ought to be performed by their juniors or seniors, and this results in inadequate time left over for training their juniors or subordinates, which in turn causes a high rate of turnover among younger workers. The problems of employees of intermediate age influence other age groups as well and affect the entire workplace. Behind this problem lies a backdrop of uneven age distribution, a primary cause of which is the widespread curtailing or suspension of hiring of new graduates at many companies in the past. As a result, workplaces today need a sufficient number of new graduates to fill the gap, but discussions or negotiations between labor and management to determine what this “sufficient number” might be only take place at around 16% of enterprises. Human resources are the bedrock on which businesses are built, and today there is an urgent need to consider this issue from a long-term perspective.

I. Recognition of Issues

Continued existence and expansion are among the main objectives of enterprises' business operations, and to achieve this, it is vital that skills and techniques be handed down from one generation to the next, and that they evolve and develop. A company is upheld by its workers, and the trajectory of a worker's career ought to begin with acquisition of predecessors' knowledge, wisdom, and skills, continue with improvement and advancement of the worker's own professional competencies, and be completed when he or she hands them down to successors. This process is what underlies both the growth of enterprises and the

maintenance and improvement of workers' standards of living. In Japan, many workers are hired upon graduation, learn their trade from square one while working for that employer, and attain competence and self-sufficiency in the workplace, becoming one of the core personnel that uphold the company and cultivate younger co-workers who will eventually succeed them. In other words, for both enterprises and their employees, the axis of time—a worker's career path involving inheriting knowledge, skills, and techniques from predecessors, developing, and growing professionally—is a crucial backbone of the workplace. For each worker, this process takes place in parallel with other members of his or her own age cohort, and bonds among members of a certain generation who have been trained and worked together are indispensable, as is mutual cooperation between different age cohorts. For this system to function effectively, the age distribution of a workplace must have sufficient balance. When workers of various age groups cooperate and fulfill their duties, business operations are smoothly executed, human resources are cultivated, and skills and techniques are handed down and develop over time. Without appropriate age balance, on the other hand, the entire system may break down.

Unfortunately, this appropriate age balance is not easily achieved. Japanese society is progressively aging, and the population of working-age adults is aging as well and is projected to shrink in the future. Educational levels are also rising and the percentage of students advancing to university now exceeds 50%, while with the enactment of the amended Act on Stabilization of Employment of Elderly Persons in April 2013, it is mandatory for companies to offer continued employment to workers who seek it through age 65. The average age at which people enter the workforce is rising, as is the average age of retirement. Workplaces as a whole are aging, and there already serious concerns in some quarters about insufficient numbers of younger workers.

Economic fluctuations also have a significant impact. During the economic bubble of the late 1980s, enormous numbers of new graduates were hired en masse, while during the prolonged recession that followed, there was a hiring slowdown referred to as an "employment ice age," with many enterprises strictly curbing or completely suspending hiring. It can be deduced that due to this legacy, many workplaces today have a worker age distribution that does not match their needs.

Age-related trends across Japanese society as a whole are also likely to impact workplace age distribution substantially in the future, and it will become increasingly difficult to maintain the status quo. As discussed earlier, workplace age balance plays a major role in regulating enterprises' continued existence and growth, workers' professional development, and workers' economic security. However, looking back over the past 20 years, and looking forward to the future trajectory of Japanese society, it is clearly evident that social and economic trends may stand in the way of securing appropriate workplace age balance. This will in turn generate a variety of problems in the workplace.

With this in mind, this article focuses on workplace age distribution and on employ-

ees of intermediate age¹ in particular, seeking to clarify their circumstances and the challenges they face on the job. Employees of intermediate age form the crux of enterprises' human resources, they play a vital role in their operations, and as a bridge between middle-aged and older workers and younger, less experienced employees, they are indispensable for business operations and personnel cultivation, exerting an enormous influence over entire workplaces because of the central role in securing overall coordination and cooperation. Analysis of the intermediate age group means not only examination of this generation's current circumstances, but by extension, clarification of the current status and issues surrounding the overall age distribution of workplaces in Japan today.

II. Current Circumstances and Existing Research

1. The Central Role of the Intermediate Age Period

For many people, the intermediate age period (age 35 to 49) is one of heavy responsibility both at work and at home. This life stage (or career phase) is understood as one in which people establish themselves, and in the workplace this means becoming highly accustomed to and competent at specific jobs, accumulating experience and fulfilling responsibilities by performing these jobs, making contributions to their occupational fields and heightening their degree of specialization, and generally advancing their careers.² During this period, workers grow into human resources of great value to their employers, gaining authority over subordinates and fulfilling social responsibilities through their work. They strive to heighten their own competencies further, and are expected both to grow professionally as individuals, and to contribute to the development of specialized skills and techniques in their fields of expertise.

This article discusses employees of intermediate age in their roles as the crucial core of the workforce. They are on the front lines of day-to-day business operations, and at the same time act as the "backbone" of their organizations, connecting predecessors from whom they learned their trades with younger workers whom they are guiding and cultivating. This means that if this age cohort is unable to carry out its duties and fulfill its functions properly, it will not only interfere enormously with current business operations, but can also threaten the future growth and the very survival of the enterprise. With workers of this age expected to fulfill such an important and heavy responsibility to society, and to grow professionally as individuals, this is clearly the crucial stage in career formation and the circumstances of these employees exert an outsized influence over other demographic cohorts as well.

However, research on the working styles and workplace circumstances and issues of this cohort is extremely scarce. Much attention has been paid to diverse issues relating to younger workers, such as difficulty in finding employment after graduation and the high

¹ In this article, the term refers to regular employees.

² See Super (1957), Super, Sverko and Super (1995).

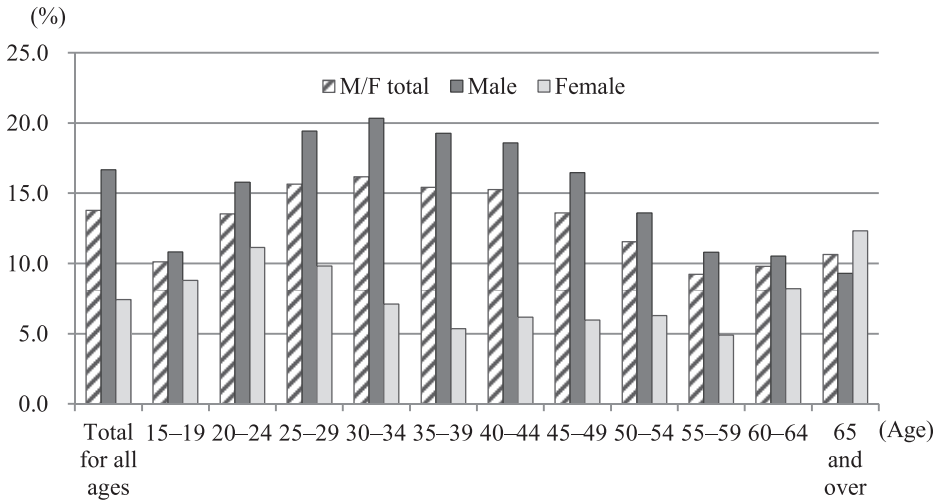
rate of resignation soon after hiring, and numerous studies have been conducted. There have also been many studies on middle-aged and older workers, analyzing their content of duties, workplace circumstances, labor conditions and so forth, with reference to the amended Act on Stabilization of Employment of Elderly Persons enacted in 2013 and problems with the pension system. Compared to their juniors and seniors, however, employees of intermediate age have relatively little impact on the external labor market, as they are generally neither entering it nor leaving it, and issues affecting this age group are not as manifest in broader society. When breaking down Japan's total unemployment rate by age group, the intermediate cohort has the lowest unemployment rate, and has not been the focus of attention in recent years, making actual workplace circumstances difficult to monitor. Despite it being such a crucial stage both for enterprises' business operations and individual employees' careers, there is a serious paucity of research that details the circumstances surrounding and issues facing employees of intermediate age.

2. Long Working Hours

With regard to the working styles of intermediate-aged employees, the area of greatest concern has been excessively long working hours. In the Japanese labor force as a whole, this area is showing signs of improvement, as government, management, and labor work together on efforts to promote work-life balance. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC) Statistics Bureau's Fiscal 2012 Employment Status Survey, the percentage of all regular employees who work 60 or more hours per week has fallen since the previous survey in 2007. However, when these figures are broken down by age group, the highest percentage is among workers aged 30–34 (16.2%), followed by age 25–29 (15.7%), closely followed by age 35–39 (15.4%) and age 40–44 (15.3%). It is evident that workers of intermediate age, in addition to younger workers, have high rates of overly long work hours (Figure 1). With regard to male employees only, approximately 20% of both the younger and intermediate-age demographic work 60 or more hours per week. Thus, the problem of excessively long work hours cannot be called resolved.

The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare's Summary of Occupational Accident Compensation for Brain- and Heart-Related Disease and Mental Disabilities (2013) shows the greatest number of claims for compensation for mental disabilities in the 30–39 age group (428 cases) followed by the 40–49 age group with 421. These are between 1.5 and 2 times the totals for age 20–29 (277 cases) and 50–59 (218 cases). The number of cases officially determined to be work-related is also markedly higher among employees of intermediate age, with 382 for the 30–39 and 347 for the 40–49 cohort. The MIC Statistics Bureau's Survey on Time Use and Leisure Activities (2011) indicates a relatively high incidence of poor health among workers whose weekly work hours exceed 60, and there is no doubt that such long working hours exact a heavy toll on workers both mentally and physically.

With this in mind, let us examine the actual working styles and circumstances of employees of intermediate age, and analyze the reasons for disproportionate workload and



Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, *Fiscal 2012 Employment Status Survey* (nationwide survey).

Note: Regular employees / civil servants whose number of working days/hours is “Unclear” are omitted from this tabulation.

Figure 1. Percentage of Regular Employees Working 60 or More Hours per Week (By Age Group)

imbalance in assignment of responsibilities.

III. Survey and Analysis

This section discusses the working styles of employees of intermediate age, the workplace issues they face, and measures to address them.

1. Survey Data

The survey data employed here was obtained from responses to questionnaire and interview surveys administered to enterprise labor unions by the Research Institute for Advancement of Living Standards (2014).³ The authors also participated in this survey, which gives a clear picture of workplace age distribution, the circumstances of each age group, and the various issues that arise as a result. Here, we focus on and analyze questionnaire survey results relating to employees of intermediate age (35–49), and on results of interview surveys targeting labor unions at enterprises where employees of intermediate age are experi-

³ Between November 2012 and May 2014, the Research Institute for Advancement of Living Standards conducted a survey by administering questionnaires and conducting interviews at labor unions so as to gauge the state of age distribution in workplaces and related issues. The results are compiled in Research Institute for Advancement of Living Standards (2014). Refer to the report for further details.

encing workplace problems and some sort of countermeasures are being adopted.⁴

2. Current Circumstances of Employees of Intermediate Age

Figure 2 illustrates the wide range of problems that employees of intermediate age experience in the workplace.⁵ Among these the most commonly cited are “Increase in workload” and “Insufficient time to provide guidance and training to juniors and subordinates,” both of which were experienced by 62.6% of respondents. These are followed by “Increase in overtime work” with 62.1%, and “Inadequate communication with colleagues, superiors, and subordinates” with 55.1%. From these responses it is evident that with extremely hectic work schedules, intermediate-aged employees are unable to communicate adequately with both older and younger age cohorts, and cannot find sufficient time to train the younger employees who will succeed them.

Could intermediate-aged employees’ excessive workload be only a temporary situation? A look forward at projections for the next five years reveals that in fact, a rising number of enterprises are expecting the problem to worsen. More than four in five labor unions (80.8%) predict an “Increase in volume of work” five years from now, and nearly as many (79.0%) predict “Insufficient time to provide guidance and training to juniors and subordinates.” Nearly as prevalent at 76.9% are labor unions forecasting an “Increase in overtime work,” and for virtually all of the other survey items, 65% or more of unions foresaw the problems in question occurring in five years’ time.

In short, employees of intermediate age are already extremely overworked and related problems are occurring in many workplaces, and this is far from being a temporary situation. On the contrary, the number of these workplaces is expected to rise further, and as the survey shows, the workplace circumstances faced by employees in this age group are truly severe.

Next, let us examine the working styles and workplace circumstances of intermediate-aged employees, and identify some of the reasons for their excessive workload.

3. Appropriate Balance of Volume of Work and Number of Employees

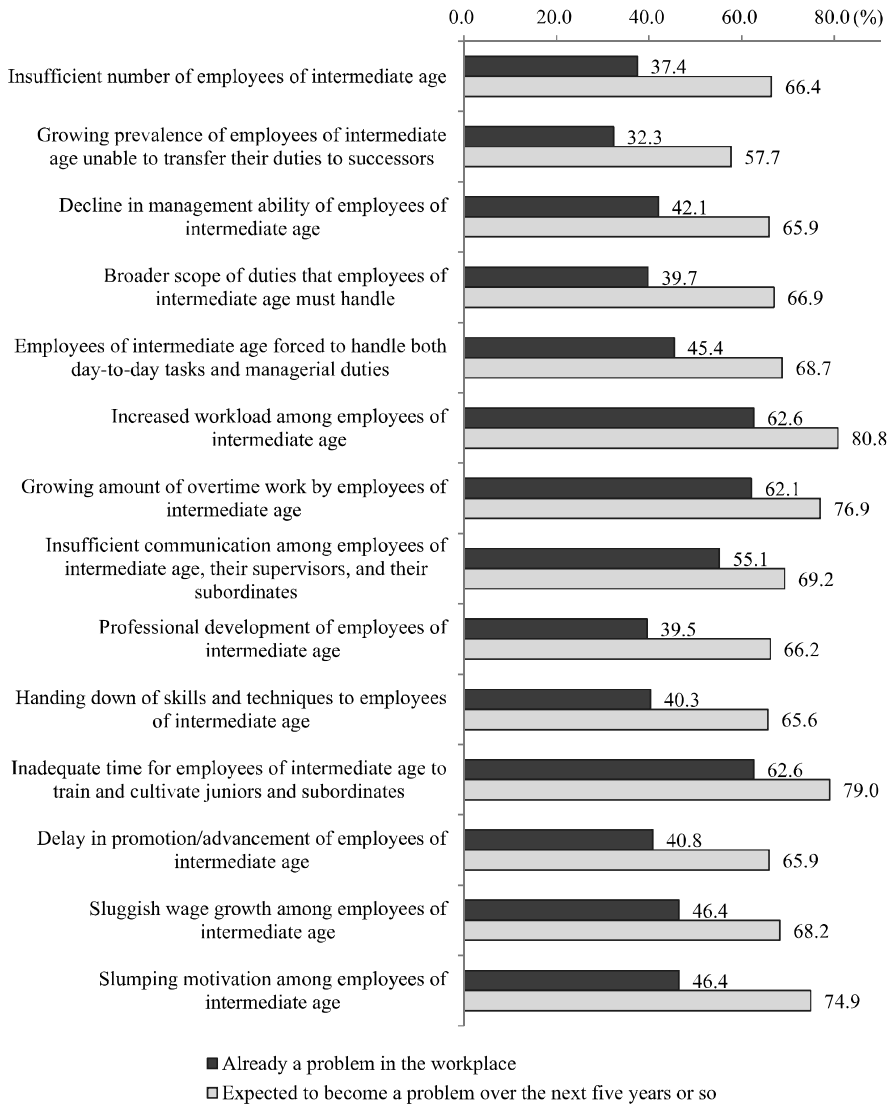
The greatest single cause of individual employees’ excessive workloads is an imbalance between the volume of work and the number of workers assigned to complete it.⁶ With this in mind, let us consider what an appropriate number of employees of intermediate age might be.

⁴ In this article, “younger employees” are those up to age 34, “employees of intermediate age” aged 35–49, “middle-aged employees” aged 50–59, and “older employees” 60 and above.

⁵ The responses in this paragraph are to the question on the Research Institute for Advancement of Living Standard (2014) survey question “Do the following problems currently affect employees of intermediate age in your workplace? Do you expect them to be a problem five years from now?”

⁶ In general, the most commonly cited reason for overtime work is an excessive per-person workload. See Ebisuno (2002).

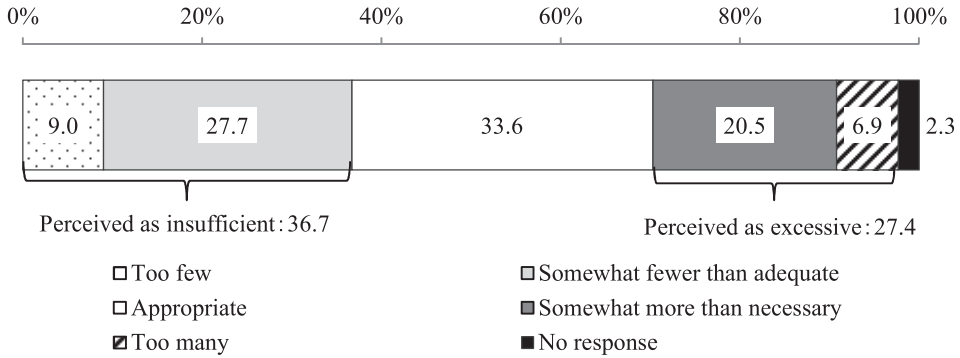
Current Status and Issues Facing Employees of Intermediate Age in the Workplace



Source: Prepared on the basis of the Research Institute for Advancement of Living Standards, *Questionnaire Survey on Changing Age Distribution and Labor-Management Relations (2013)*.

Note: Percentages for “Already a problem in the workplace” are the total of responses “Currently a problem, and expected to be one in the future as well” and “Currently a problem, but not expected to be a problem in the future.” Percentages for “Expected to become a problem over the next five years or so” are the total of responses “Currently a problem, and expected to be one in the future as well” and “Not a problem now, but expected to become one in the future.”

Figure 2. Current Workplace Issues and Future Projections for Employees of Intermediate Age (N=390)



Source: Prepared on the basis of the Research Institute for Advancement of Living Standards, *Questionnaire Survey on Changing Age Distribution and Labor-Management Relations (2013)*.

Figure 3. Perception of Number of Employees of Intermediate Age (N=390)

In researching appropriate age distribution in the course of this survey, it was found that no uniform model exists for calculating it. Age distributions that in the past would have been considered optimal, such as with a preponderance of younger workers or with even distribution of ages, are today not necessarily considered ideal in all cases. Over the past 20 years or so not all enterprises have expanded, and many have seen their business shrink amid harsh economic conditions, while others have been radically reorganized through mergers, spinoffs, or other restructuring, or have downsized their domestic operations while expanding overseas. As a result the required number of employees, overall and of specific age groups, differs depending on the organization, and optimum age distribution can change over time. For this reason there is no consistent model for age distribution, and it varies depending on conditions and circumstances. Also, the rising number of non-regular employees has led to narrowing or transformation of regular employees' scope of duties or content of work, and in some cases to downsizing or complete elimination of regular employees in some workplaces. In short, changes to organizations, content of work, or management policies have the effect of altering the number of employees needed and their appropriate age distribution, and the image of optimal age balance varies depending on conditions.

With this in mind, we examined how the current situation at enterprises and in workplaces compares with the number of employees of intermediate age that would be optimal. The results are shown in Figure 3. The greatest number, approximately one-third (33.6%), responded that they had the appropriate number of employees of this age group, followed by "somewhat fewer than adequate" at 27.7% and "somewhat more than necessary" at 20.5%. However, the percentage responding either "somewhat fewer than adequate" (27.7%) or "too few" (9.0%) adds up to 36.7%, and "somewhat more than necessary" (20.5%) or "too many" (6.9%) adds up to 27.4%.

Table 1. Top Three Areas in Which Number of Intermediate-Age Employees Is Perceived as Problematic (Too Few / Too Many)

(Single Answer, N=390)

	Increase in volume of work		Increase in overtime work		Insufficient time to provide guidance and training to juniors and subordinates	
	Current (244)	Future (315)	Current (242)	Future (300)	Current (244)	Future (308)
Perceived as insufficient	36.9	36.8	39.3	37.0	40.2	38.3
Too few	9.0	8.3	8.7	8.7	10.2	9.1
Somewhat fewer than adequate	27.9	28.6	30.6	28.3	29.9	29.2
Appropriate	31.1	32.7	30.6	34.0	30.7	32.1
Perceived as excessive	31.1	28.9	29.3	27.3	27.9	27.9
Somewhat more than necessary	22.5	20.6	20.2	19.7	20.9	20.8
Too many	8.6	8.3	9.1	7.7	7.0	7.1
No response	0.8	1.6	0.8	1.7	1.2	1.6

Source: Prepared on the basis of the Research Institute for Advancement of Living Standards, *Questionnaire Survey on Changing Age Distribution and Labor-Management Relations (2013)*.

Note: Numbers in parentheses on table indicate total number of responses.

(20.5%) and “too many” (6.9%) to 27.4%, meaning that while “appropriate number” may have been the most common response, there is an obvious and almost equal three-way division between these labor unions and those that feel they have either too few or too many employees of the age cohort in question.

Table 1 shows the distribution of enterprise labor unions that feel they have an inadequate or excessive number of employees of intermediate age, by relevant issue. The top three issues are “Increase in volume of work,” “Insufficient time to provide guidance and training to juniors and subordinates,” and “Increase in overtime work.”

Examining the number of employees of intermediate age in workplaces where the top three issues above are cited, the largest category of labor unions responding to the survey (nearly 40%) felt that there were an insufficient number of employees of this age cohort. However, this does not constitute all or even a majority of workplaces perceiving these three problems both in the present and in the future, and in fact they are fairly evenly divided into three groups, with over 30% believing they currently had an “appropriate” number of these employees, and nearly 30% feeling they had an “excessive” number. Labor unions perceiving a workplace as having an “appropriate” number of employees of intermediate age does not necessarily mean it is free of issues, and in fact many of these workplaces face the issue of excessive workload, with the proportion likely to grow further in the future.

How can overworked employees (of intermediate age), with overly hectic schedules, be reconciled with a perception of an “appropriate” or even “excessive” number of these employees? When we consider balance between volume of work and number of personnel, workplaces with too many or just the right number of personnel ought not to have chronically overworked employees. Let us examine the interview survey results in detail to determine why this might be occurring.

4. Three Patterns of Excessive Workload among Employees of Intermediate Age

Here we will examine responses from 11 enterprise labor unions participating in the Research Institute interview survey and responding that employees of intermediate age experienced problems in the workplace. Table 2 shows the nature of problems experienced by employees of intermediate age and workplace circumstances, etc.⁷

Perceptions regarding the number of employees of intermediate age can be divided into three types: A (perceiving the number of these employees as insufficient), B (optimal), and C (excessive). Let us examine the characteristics of these three types.

Type A

Labor unions responding that their workplaces have “somewhat fewer than adequate” or “too few” employees of intermediate age fit this type. Because there are not enough of said employees to handle the volume of work they must handle, each individual employee’s workload is too great, and the employees are overworked. As a result, they do not have enough time to train their juniors or subordinates. Many of these respondents perceive the number of younger workers as “appropriate,” indicating that personnel numbers (intermediate-age employees to younger employees) are imbalanced so that there is a relative scarcity of personnel in the position of “teaching” position and too many in that of “learning.”

A notable cause of this situation is widespread curtailment or suspension of hiring in the past, with many respondents indicating that their organizations had greatly cut back on or completely frozen hiring of new graduates during the so-called employment ice age (roughly the early 90s through the mid-2000s) following the massive hiring of the economic bubble period (late 80s to the beginning of the 90s).

Type B

Workplaces in this category are perceived as having the right number of employees of intermediate age, but at the same time these employees are barely able to keep up with the workload and cannot find sufficient time to train their juniors or subordinates. One would assume that an “appropriate” number of workers would mean a good balance between number of employees and volume of work, and that employees would not be overworked,

⁷ Outline of results from 11 labor unions is shown in Appendix Table (page 53). For further details, refer to Research Institute for Advancement of Living Standards (2014).

so why is this problem afflicting employees of intermediate age? Detailed examination of the responses reveals a common theme, namely the perception that there are not enough younger workers. This indicates that due to a lack of younger workers, their seniors are performing what ought to be their duties—the experienced core personnel of the workplace, who are in positions of responsibility, are executing tasks that can and should be handled by younger and less experienced personnel. In other words, there are enough intermediate-age employees to handle the tasks that should rightly be theirs, but they are overworked because they are also handling tasks that should be the province of younger employees.

Why are there too few younger workers in these workplaces? Again, we come up against the legacy of past cutbacks and freezes in hiring of new graduates, particularly during the so-called employment ice age.

Type C

Respondents in this category claimed the number of employees of intermediate age was “somewhat more than necessary” or even “excessive,” but at the same time these employees appear to be overburdened, working excessively long hours and finding insufficient time to train or guide younger workers. Despite having more intermediate-age employees than would be required to handle the tasks that ought to be theirs, these workplaces report that workers in this age group are overworked. What these workplaces appear to have in common is a perceived shortage of both younger workers and middle-aged and older workers.

The problem of insufficient younger workers due to curbing or suspension of hiring of new graduates during the so-called employment ice age is shared in common with Type B, but in addition to this, middle-aged and older workers are in short supply because of large-scale employee transfers and early retirements during periods of recession. For this reason, employees of intermediate age are not able to dedicate themselves fully to their proper role as core personnel, connecting and bridging the gap between younger and older workers, but are also covering the duties of both their juniors and their seniors out of necessity in addition to their own. Naturally there is a limit to the amount of work they can perform, and as a result they are insufficiently able to perform their own management duties or keep an eye on their juniors. However, there are also not enough senior employees for them to consult when faced with these harsh workplace environments and the range of challenges they present, and some survey respondents reported suffering on the part of overly burdened and isolated intermediate-aged employees. Even with a perceived excess of employees of intermediate age, these employees are forced to perform tasks beyond their rightful scope of duties, and face both overwork and isolation in the workplace.

As we have seen, while there are three recognizable categories of workplace (A, B, and C) in terms of perceived number of employees of intermediate age, these employees are burdened with excessive workloads regardless of category, albeit for reasons that vary depending on category.

Table 2. Issues and Strategies toward

Type A: Too few employees of intermediate age

Labor union (industrial sector)	Employees of intermediate age	Younger employees	Middle-aged and older employees	Background
Labor union A (General chemical)	Somewhat fewer than adequate	Appropriate	Somewhat more than necessary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hired large numbers of new graduates during bubble period, cut back or suspended hiring during ensuing employment ice age.
Labor union B (Steel)	Too few	Appropriate	Too many	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suspended hiring of new graduates from oil crisis of 70s through end of 80s.
Labor union C (Automotive)	Somewhat fewer than adequate	Appropriate	Appropriate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hired large numbers of new graduates in and around bubble period, cut back hiring, etc. during Asian financial crisis (1997), employment ice age, global financial crisis, etc.
Labor union D (Financial)	Somewhat fewer than adequate	Appropriate	Too many	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suspended hiring as a result of in-house merger in late 90s.

Employees of Intermediate Age, by Type of Workplace

Issues	Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some workplaces have no workers younger than 40. Heavy workload compared to number of employees causes frequent overtime work, work-life balance issues. • Not enough late-30s (assistant manager level) workers. • Middle-aged and older employees in charge of guidance for younger employees, major generation gap causes communication problems. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Considering assigning rehired employees in their 60s to train and cultivate younger employees. Motivation among older employees expected to rise due to pride in skills and techniques amassed over the years and sense of achievement from handing them down to juniors.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Before younger employees can absorb and inherit skills and techniques, they need to be handed down to employees of intermediate age. • Employees of intermediate age do not have enough time to train and guide juniors and subordinates. • Major age gap between workers in charge of training (age 60+) and younger employees. • Delay in promotion of employees of intermediate age. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assign employees in their 60s to train and guide younger employees, building on their extensive experience.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in workload and in number of subordinates lowers management quality, impairs communication, and interferes with training and professional development, and problems are expected to worsen. Younger employees have too few role models. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduced training program aimed at achieving handing down of skills and techniques on an organization-wide basis. • Labor union carries out unique in-house cultural and athletic activities in a lively fashion, while company promotes intergenerational communication through QC activities and small-group activities.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employees of intermediate age have heavy workload and hectic schedules, not enough time to train juniors and subordinates. Cultivation of younger employees is inadequate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider it important to boost competency level of employees in trainer position.

Table 2

Labor union E (Bread)	Somewhat fewer than adequate	Too many	Too few	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stepped up recruiting about 20 years ago due to success of diversification strategy.
Labor union F (General heavy industry)	Somewhat fewer than adequate	Somewhat fewer than adequate	Somewhat more than necessary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Severely curtailed hiring of on-site workers so as to survive fierce competition from South Korean and Taiwanese manufacturers in the 80s and super-strong yen following 1985 Plaza Accord.

Type B: Appropriate number of employees of intermediate age

Labor union (industrial sector)	Employees of intermediate age	Younger employees	Middle-aged and older employees	Background
Labor union G (Chemical)	Appropriate	Too few	Somewhat more than necessary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Curtailed hiring of new graduates from 2000 onward due to severe business environment.
Labor union H (Apparel)	Appropriate	Too few	Somewhat more than necessary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hired new graduates in large numbers during bubble period, suspended hiring from 1989 through 1998, and from then on shifted production overseas or to rural areas of Japan.

(Continued)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Severe shortage of employees of intermediate age compared to younger employees, causing undeniably insufficient training of subordinates and handing down of skills and techniques. • Increased workload, and increasing demand to play role of evaluator for younger employees. • Consistently long working hours and difficulty taking paid vacation days. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focusing resources on training for younger employees such as “junior step-up training” (one-day course including talk by top management, business manners, safety and health training, group discussions etc. to raise awareness) and “assistant manager training” (for employees aged around 30).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employees in their 30s particularly need to inherit skills and techniques from seniors, but there are too few in this age group, and process is not adequately implemented, giving labor union a sense of crisis. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduced “meister” program in 2002 which certifies older, highly experienced employees in their 50s and 60s and puts them in position of mentoring “sub-meisters” in their 30s and handing down skills and techniques.
Issues	Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Root of the problem lies in handing down of skills and techniques. High expectations are placed on highly skilled and experienced intermediate-aged, middle-aged and older employees. There is an urgent need for the company to clarify what needs to be handed down. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enterprise has introduced a workplace advisor program for new (high school or university) graduates. An employee 3 to 5 years the new graduate’s senior is appointed as advisor, and provides comprehensive guidance on both job-related and daily life-related matters for one year.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employees of intermediate age have high degree of specialized skill, but difficulty in transferring duties to juniors. Difficulty in keeping up with workload, and in self-managing workflow (handling tasks more efficiently so as to generate extra time). As a result, there is insufficient time to train and cultivate juniors and subordinates. • In the future, problems with delayed promotions and stagnant wages are foreseen. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Labor and management need to work together on reviewing the roles and day-to-day tasks of employees of intermediate age, and render the process more visible. • The labor union views employees of intermediate age as a cohort for which work-life balance is a particularly difficult and important challenge, and sees a need for labor-management discussion “flexible approaches to time management.” • As the number of older employees continuing to work after retirement age is expected to increase, both labor and management have expectations for some older workers to play the role of cultivating successors.

Table 2

Labor union I (Department store)	Appropriate	Too few	Somewhat more than necessary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cut back on hiring of new graduates amid decreasing personnel needs and consideration of sales capacity improvement strategies.
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Type C: Too many employees of intermediate age

Labor union (industrial sector)	Employees of intermediate age	Younger employees	Middle-aged and older employees	Background
Labor union J (Construction)	Too many	Too few	Somewhat fewer than adequate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> During the bubble period, large numbers of new graduates were hired, but hiring was curtailed during the ensuing employment ice age. Since the late 1990s the construction industry has also been in a slump, and the number of employees has been slashed through solicitation of early retirements.
Labor union K (Electrical industry)	Too many	Too few	Somewhat fewer than adequate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> During the bubble period, large numbers of new graduates were hired. Afterward, in the 1990s many were transferred to other Group companies, and many more to new companies generated by spinoffs from 2008 onward.

Source: Prepared on the basis of Research Institute for Advancement of Living Standards, *Age Labor-Management Concerns (2014)*.

Note: The “bubble period” refers to the Japanese economic boom years of the late 1980s and following the bubble’s collapse (1993–2005).

(Continued)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Range of duties handled by employees of intermediate age has expanded, leading to increased workload. • Insufficient time for employees of intermediate age to train juniors and subordinates. (Decline in number of opportunities for younger employees to accompany buyers and obtain OJT.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Labor and management create opportunities for communication and sharing of in-house information from both parties' perspectives. • Programs involving competition between workplaces introduced to generate sense of unity spanning all generations (wrapping skill contests, sales/budget target achievement rate competition, etc.).
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Issues	Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High expectations are placed on employees aged 30–39 to cultivate younger employees. However, intermediate-aged employees (aged 35–49) have a significantly greater workload than other generations, and work excessive amounts of overtime, meaning they do not have time to take care of younger employees. (About 10 years ago, the number of resignations among younger employees began increasing noticeably.) • An increasing number of people find themselves hitting a ceiling in terms of wage increases, promotions, and career advancement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The labor union has formed “young employees’ circles,” and with the cooperation of the enterprise, many union chapters are holding meetings once to four times a year during working hours, where opinions and views are exchanged. • For newly hired employees, the company appoints a mentor (aged 20–59) to follow their progress for three months. Specifically, this entails new employees submitting reports once a week, based on which the mentor gives advice. Training for mentors is also provided to ensure consistent quality of mentorship. (Nonetheless, there are persistent concerns over future decline in cultivation of younger employees.)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employees of intermediate age have disproportionately large workloads. They are expected to serve as core personnel for short-term profit generation, and do not have spare time to spend on cultivating younger employees. • Labor union sees working hours for this age group as excessively long, and sees the need for correction of overlong working hours and support for employees who have family obligations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Career design training segmented by age group (30s, 40s, 50s) is implemented. There is also a program of career counseling offering across-the-board guidance for career formation. • For the first two years after being hired, younger employees are given OJT by an employee with several years of experience, to ensure their basic life skills and professional competencies are on track.

Distribution Imbalance and Related Issues: Study on Changing Labor Force Composition and

beginning of the 1990s. The “employment ice age” refers to sluggish hiring during the recession

5. Significance and Impact of This Issue

The problem of excessive workload among employees of intermediate age, which is expected to become even more widespread in the future, does not only interfere with these employees' ability to complete their rightful duties, and place them in a difficult position—it also has a significant negative impact on other age groups, that is on the workplace as a whole, and on the operations of entire enterprises.

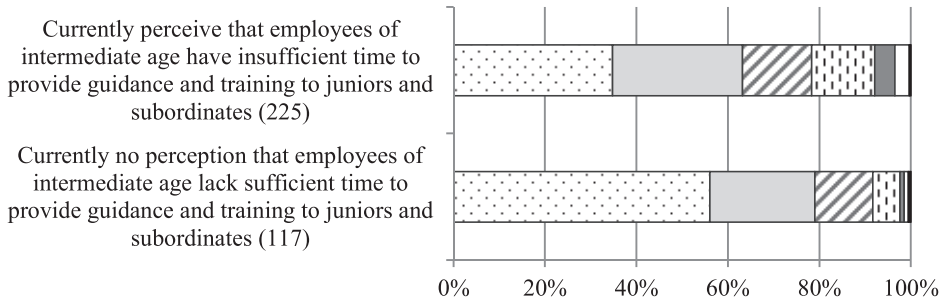
Employees of intermediate age are supposed to be core personnel that inherit knowledge, skills, and techniques from middle-aged and older workers, grow professionally as individuals while contributing to the advancement of these skills and techniques, and cultivate younger co-workers who will eventually succeed them. If employees of intermediate age are unable to play this crucial role, the entire process will grind to a halt, threatening the growth and very survival of enterprises and severely detracting from their competitiveness and business performance.

The intermediate age cohort plays a crucial role not only in the greater arc of enterprises' development, but also in day-to-day business operations in which they serve on the front lines, while fostering their juniors as well. Their inability to fulfill this role affects the entire workplace and has a substantial negative effect on the efficacy and professional development of younger workers. In recent years many workplaces have reported serious problems with high rates of turnover (i.e. resignation not long after hiring) among younger employees, and with their professional development, and these issues facing employees of intermediate age clearly contribute to this. Because intermediate-aged employees are overburdened and cannot keep up with their own tasks, they are unable to keep an eye on younger workers, and this means they are not only unable to spend sufficient time cultivating them, they may also miss important signs that their juniors are struggling on the job, and be unable to pay attention to, care for, and discuss issues with them, often creating a negative workplace atmosphere and environment in which people feel unable to consult others about their concerns. This in turn stunts younger workers' professional development and leads them to resign soon after being hired. As shown in Figure 4,⁸ among both university and high school graduates, rates of turnover are higher in workplaces where employees of intermediate age have insufficient time to provide guidance and training to younger workers than in others. Conversely, among enterprises with a low rate (below 5%) of resignation within the first three years after hiring, more than half (56.4%) reported sufficient time devoted to training and guidance, and only 35% (with regard to university graduates) and 41% (with regard to high school graduates) reported insufficient time. It is often difficult for younger workers who have not yet developed professionally to resolve problems on their own, and it is extremely important to have a system in place in which they can easily consult their seniors when issues arise. However, when these seniors are overburdened and can

⁸ Indicates responses to question about rate of resignation within three years after hiring among new graduates (university graduates and high school graduates). "No new graduates hired" and "no response" omitted from tabulation of results.

Current Status and Issues Facing Employees of Intermediate Age in the Workplace

Rate of resignation among university graduates



Rate of resignation among high school graduates

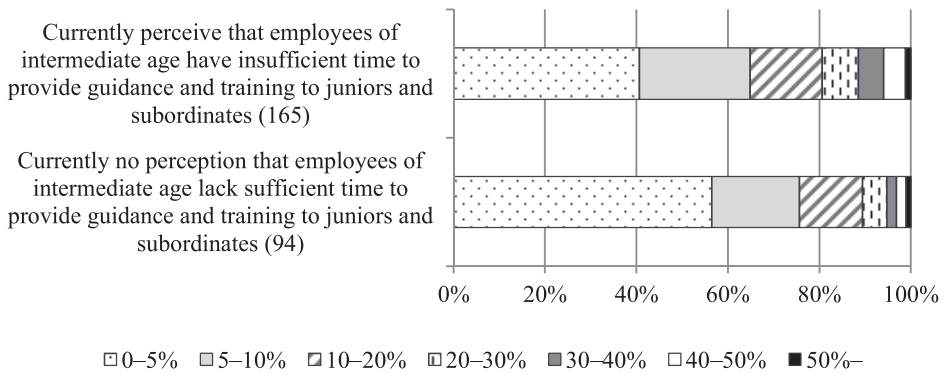


Figure 4. Rate of Resignation among University Graduates and High School Graduates Depending on Whether or Not Intermediate-Age Employees Have Insufficient Time to Train and Cultivate Younger Workers

barely keep up with their own duties, younger workers feel reluctant to consult them, yet are unable to resolve issues on their own, and end up quitting before long.

The flow of handing down skills and techniques to successors, cultivating human resources, and performing day-to-day operations is one that the entire workplace must work together to achieve, and partnership and cooperation among different age groups is essential. When intermediate-age employees who form the crux of this partnership and cooperation are unable to fulfill their duties and functions, younger workers, and indeed the entire workplace and enterprise are enormously affected. As predictions point to this problem growing more widespread and severe in the future, it must be considered an issue of the utmost urgency.

6. Countermeasures

In this section we will examine case examples of countermeasures described by labor unions responding to the survey. No doubt the most effective strategy is to secure the appropriate age distribution in the workplace, for example by reinforcing the ranks of employees of specific age cohorts. However, this is not easily done, as illustrated by imbalanced age distribution resulting from lackluster hiring during the oil crises of the 70s, which persists 30 years later and will not be resolved until this generation reaches retirement age. Once a pattern of age distribution is entrenched it is difficult to make significant adjustments to it. Some enterprises have attempted to modify the age balance with mid-career hires, but this has not resolved the problem, due to difficulties such as training these employees effectively in the required skills and techniques.

A common strategy to address the situation was support from older workers aged 60 or above. It is mandatory for companies to offer employment up until the age of 65 to those wishing to keep working, and providing support for overworked employees of intermediate age has been seen as an important role of senior workers with extensive experience and a command of sophisticated skills and techniques. It has also been viewed as an effective strategy for resolving serious difficulties in finding enough appropriate tasks for older workers as their ranks increase. Providing advice and training for employees of intermediate age is an area that can only be handled by older veteran employees with many years of experience, and enables them to feel rewarded and motivated on the job, while their support can alleviate the overly hectic schedules of employees of intermediate age. This, in turn, can help them find time to develop their own professional competencies and devote attention to training their juniors. A system in which older employees provide support to employees of intermediate age has significant benefits for both groups, and also has a positive impact on the working styles of middle-aged to older workers between the two age groups who base their own practices on this model. Naturally, having an effective training structure in place benefits younger workers as well. In short, having the oldest employees in the workplace provide support to overworked employees of intermediate age is a strategy that significantly benefits the entire workplace.

As described earlier, problems with cultivating younger workers have been noted in recent years, and it is frequently suggested that having the oldest employees train the youngest workers could be a solution. However, this survey found a considerable number of case examples in which the large age gap caused difficulties. Older employees report not knowing how to teach things to workers much younger than themselves, and younger workers find it difficult to ask questions or seek advice from older workers due to a lack of common ground in terms of topics. It appears that the most effective strategy for handing down skills and knowledge and training younger generations is for employees of intermediate age (35–49) to play their rightful role in training younger employees (up to 34), with support from older employees (60 and above). When each age cohort plays its proper role, and older employees are able to make effective use of the competencies they have devel-

oped over many years, it serves to heighten the morale not only of older employees but of everyone in the workplace.

IV. Summary

Compared to the youngest and oldest employees, society pays scant attention to the issues faced by employees of intermediate age, but examination of their working styles and circumstances reveals serious problems with excessive workload. In the future, it is predicted that these problems will only grow worse. This section encapsulates the matters discussed thus far and summarizes issues to be dealt with going forward.

1. Issues Facing Employees of Intermediate Age Affect the Entire Workplace

The greatest single cause of excessive workloads is an imbalance between the volume of work and the number of workers, but when we drill down on the root causes, we find three main patterns. These are: workplaces with too few employees of intermediate age to handle the volume of work they must handle; workplaces with the right number of employees of intermediate age but too few younger workers, meaning that intermediate-age employees must cover for younger employees and become overworked; and workplaces with somewhat more intermediate-age employees than necessary, but a shortage of both younger workers and middle-aged and older workers, meaning that the employees in the intermediate age cohort are still overburdened because they must complete tasks that are rightfully the province of their juniors and seniors, and are isolated without older mentors to consult.

Excessive workloads interfere with the duties employees of intermediate age ought to fulfill, such as management duties, building their own competency, contributing to the advancement of knowledge, skills, and techniques, and cultivating younger co-workers who will succeed them. This means issues affecting intermediate-age employees have an impact extending beyond that age cohort, contributing significantly to the serious problems that have affected younger employees recently, such as difficulty with training and a high rate of resignation soon after hiring. Employees of intermediate age are the “backbone” of workplaces’ human resources, playing crucial roles on the front lines of day-to-day business operations, and at the same time inheriting knowledge, skills, and techniques from predecessors and handing it down to younger workers whom they are guiding and cultivating. This means that this age cohort exerts an enormous impact over all other age groups and the entire workplace, and the abovementioned problems with younger employees are a prime example of this.

Looking back at the past, the problems currently facing employees of intermediate age similarly represent the legacy of influence from other age groups, and in the future they will go on to impact others significantly. It is precisely because employees of intermediate age are the linchpin of workplaces’ human resources that they are both highly subject to influence from other age groups, and exert an outsized impact on them. Various age groups

in the workplace are inextricably intertwined with deep and enduring ties, and problems affecting one of them are by no means limited to that group, nor can that group resolve the problems alone. Neither difficulties in cultivating younger workers nor problems with excessive workload among intermediate-age workers can be resolved unless workers of all ages tackle problems together in a cooperative and coordinated fashion.

2. Issues for the Future

The most effective means of resolving the problems we have been examining is to secure the appropriate age distribution in the workplace. However, the imbalanced age distribution that leads to excessive workload for employees of intermediate age has roots going all the way back to time of hiring, such as the curtailment or suspension of hiring of new graduates during the so-called employment ice age (roughly the early 90s through the mid-2000s). Some enterprises have attempted to modify the age balance with mid-career hires of personnel in underrepresented age groups, but this has not resolved the problem due to problems such as training these employees effectively in the required skills and techniques. The pattern of age distribution is essentially created and entrenched at the time of hiring of new graduates, its influence persisting indefinitely thereafter. Enterprises that are attempting to resolve the problem do so by rendering it visible, specifying the tasks with which intermediate-age employees require support and assigning abundantly experienced older employees to provide it. Only these employees can play the role of supporting and cultivating employees of intermediate age, and it enables the veteran employees to feel rewarded and motivated on the job. This is evidently an appropriate task for older employees, whose ranks will grow in the future. Having the oldest employees train the youngest workers results in communication difficulties caused by the large age gap, so it appears that they are more suited to supporting employees of intermediate age. It is a highly effective strategy that benefits both age groups and, by extension, the entire workplace.

However, there remains a need for measures that directly impact age distribution itself, which is shaped by hiring, entrenched, and becomes the source of problems later when imbalanced. In this survey, workplaces that did not report problems involving employees of intermediate age were those that hired new graduates constantly, and ensured appropriate age distribution.⁹ This points to the importance of closely examining the workplace situation, identifying who handles which tasks, and determining how many employees of each age cohort are needed. In fact, however, unions where labor and management held discussions or group negotiations on the number of new graduates to hire accounted for a mere 16% of the total (Figure 5).¹⁰ This means that conversely, over 80% of organizations held no labor-management talks on hiring levels, which are the greatest cause of problems

⁹ Refer to interview survey by Research Institute for Advancement of Living Standards (2014).

¹⁰ Indicates responses to survey question about whether labor and management held discussions on the number of new graduates hired. It should be noted that in Japan, labor-management discussions and negotiations primarily take place between enterprises and enterprise labor unions.

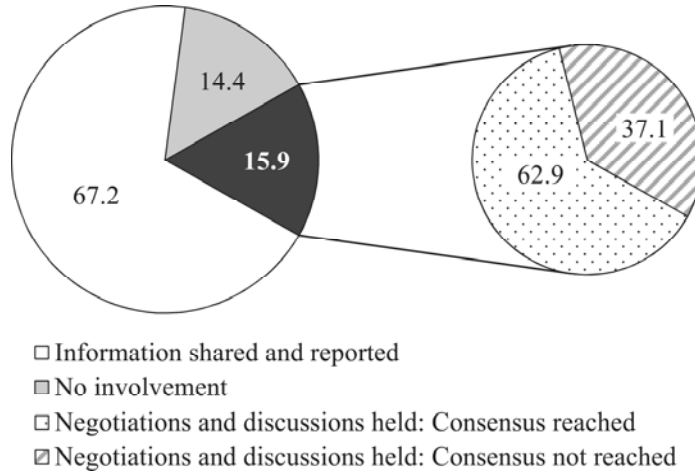


Figure 5. Percentage of Unions Engaging in Labor-Management Negotiations/ Discussions on Number of New Graduates to Hire

afflicting employees of intermediate age, despite the severity of age distribution imbalances in so many workplaces. The number of new graduates hired each year fluctuates greatly depending on broader economic conditions, companies’ business performance, and management policies. A framework in which older employees support those of intermediate age is currently being implemented as an immediate countermeasure, and appears effective as a means of soothing the simmering pressures of the workplace. However, the problem is sure to grow even more severe in the future, and there are concerns over the impact of even more imbalanced age distribution. If human resources are not sufficiently cultivated today, even if their numbers are reasonably sufficient, the next generation of employees of intermediate age may not be able to fulfill their proper functions, the next generation of middle-aged and older workers may not be able to play their rightful roles, and so forth. Problems that are latent today may manifest themselves in more obvious form. Going forward, we may face a shortage of human resources in a qualitative sense.

Workplace age distribution has a significant influence on enterprises’ continued existence and growth, workers’ professional development, and workers’ economic security. Once this age distribution is entrenched, it is very hard to modify it after the fact. This means it is crucial to look at human resource needs from a medium to long-term perspective, and to resolve problems by addressing their root causes. As we have seen, there is no consistent model for age distribution, making it all the more important for labor and management at each enterprise to monitor and assess workplace circumstances and appropriate numbers of personnel for each age group. While taking into account the number of older employees, which is expected to grow in the future, and the roles they play, there is also a pressing need to consider the number of new graduates to hire, as they will eventually be-

come the core personnel upholding the enterprise. Even if management makes the final decision on number of people hired, it is vital for the long-term growth and development of both management and labor for both parties to have an accurate understanding of the situation in the workplace, and to work together on resolving personnel-related issues.

Finally, the limitations of this survey should be noted, along with issues for future study. In its analysis of enterprises' core personnel, this survey focused on regular employees. However, as we have seen, the root causes of age distribution problems extend back to the time of hiring, and here the role of non-regular personnel cannot be ignored. Today, non-regular personnel handle many tasks that were formerly the province of regular employees, and this has a considerable impact on the number of regular employees needed. As a rule, non-regular employees are hired and utilized based on the tasks they are to perform, with age not taken into account, and their working styles and circumstances are essentially unrelated to the axes of age and time that are central to this study. There is an urgent need for further examination of the composition of the labor force, which takes into account the relationship between these fundamentally different types of personnel.

Appendix Table

Labor union	No. of union members	No. of employees	Year of union establishment	Parent organization	Unionization of eligible non-regular employees
A	9,470	17,555	1946	The Japanese Federation of Textile, Chemical, Food, Commercial, Service and General Workers' Unions (UA Zenzen)	Non-regular employees rehired after retirement
B	16,087	16,755	2003 (established after merger)	Japan Federation of Basic Industry Worker's Unions	Non-regular employees rehired after retirement
C	9,871	12,034	1946	Confederation of Japan Automobile Workers' Unions (JAW)	No unionization
D	919	1,093	1997 (established after merger)	Federation of Labour Bank Workers Union of Japan	Non-regular employees, including those rehired after retirement
E	3,480	3,764	1963	Federation of All Japan Foods and Tobacco Workers' Unions (JFU)	Non-regular employees rehired after retirement
F	9,506	7,448	1963	Japan Federation of Basic Industry Worker's Unions	Non-regular employees rehired after retirement
G	1,196	1,411	1946	Japanese Federation of Energy and Chemistry Workers' Unions (JEC)	No unionization
H	226	266	1955	The Japanese Federation of Textile, Chemical, Food, Commercial, Service and General Workers' Unions (UA Zenzen)	No unionization
I	1,708	1,148	1964	The Japanese Federation of Textile, Chemical, Food, Commercial, Service and General Workers' Unions (UA Zenzen)	Part-time employees and non-regular employees rehired after retirement
J	1,366	1,761	1949	Council of Japan Construction Industry Employees' Unions (JCU)	No unionization
K	2,490	3,810	1945	Japanese Electrical Electronic & Information Union (JEIU)	Non-regular employees rehired after retirement

Note: Numbers of people are as of April 1, 2013. Figures for Union F refer to employees of the main company only, and employees of affiliates are not included.

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