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Current State of Working Hours and Overwork in Japan

Part II: Why do the Japanese Work Long Hours?

Tomohiro Takami

The previous article (Part I) in this series overviewed the characteristics of working hours and their trends in Japan, and addressed working time arrangements intended to prevent overwork. Why do the Japanese work so long? While insufficient legal regulations are indeed noted as a possible factor behind long working hours, they are not the only cause. In this article, we explore this question by considering the characteristics of the Japanese-style employment system and its related issues such as industry-specific working customs and practices.

I. The reasons for working overtime

Figure 1 shows the reasons for working overtime, drawing on the results of a questionnaire survey of employees. An outstandingly large proportion of the non-managerial employees responded that they work overtime because of their “heavy workload.” Those workers are unable to complete their tasks unless they work overtime. Along with excessive workloads, the survey revealed other factors behind overtime, including “sudden and unexpected tasks,” “shortage of personnel,” “due to nature of the work,” and “tight deadlines.” The characteristics of work and the situation of workplaces are thought to be the factors behind employees’ working overtime on a regular basis.

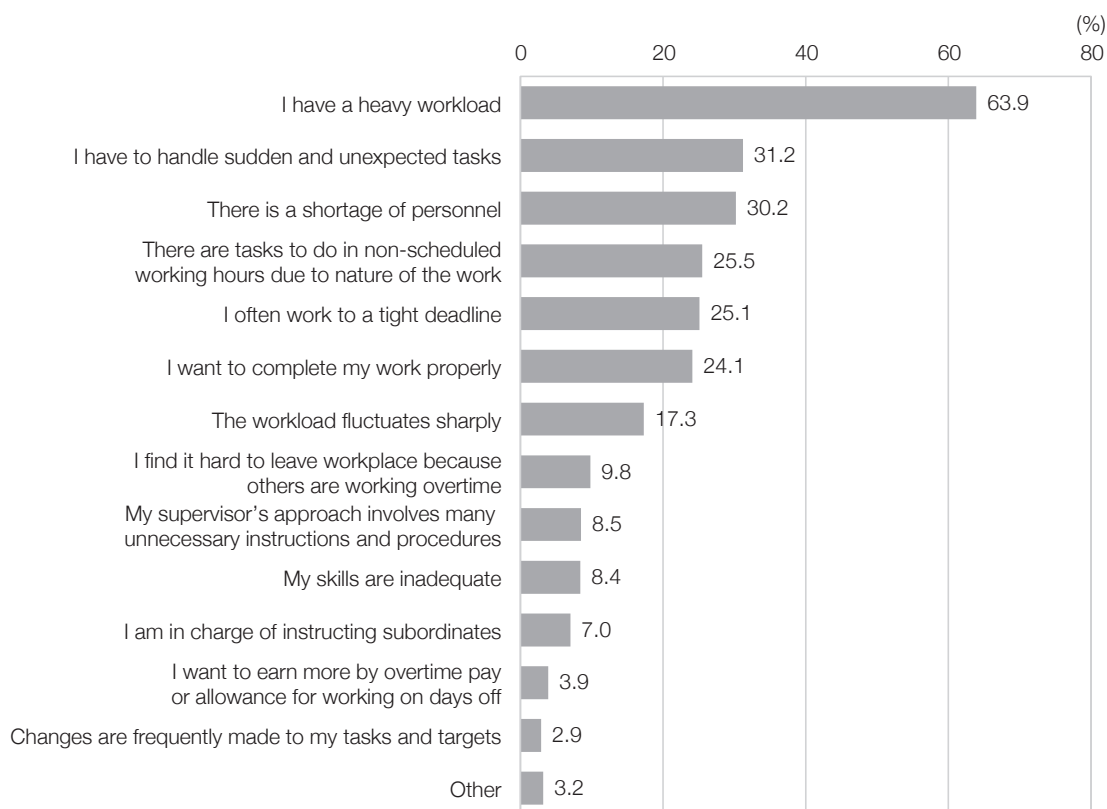
II. The Japanese-style employment system and overtime

Long working hours in Japan are said to be attributed to the Japanese-style employment system, people’s attitude to work, and industry practices. It is also argued that the causes of overtime are deeply

rooted in Japan’s industrial society, rather than being the results of labor management at individual companies. Let us consider whether this is the case.

The Japanese-style employment system is defined as an employment and labor system aimed at ensuring the long-term livelihood security and skills development of its members (where “members” is almost synonymous with regular employees), which has typically been seen in large corporations and manufacturing companies since Japan’s high economic growth period from the 1960s to the early 1970s (JILPT 2017). It is composed of elements unique to Japan that are centered around the long-term employment practice known as “lifetime employment.” These include a seniority-based wage and promotion system, cooperative industrial relations, and in-house skills development through approaches such as on-the-job training and job rotation. Japanese companies have also been known for their community-like nature. Relations between labor and management are not merely employer-employee relationships (that is, economic relationships), but mutual aid based on a sense of unity (Hazama 1996). Why, then, does such an employment system lead to overtime?

Firstly, under the system of cooperative industrial relations in Japan, overtime work has been seen as a “buffer” against employment adjustment. Companies avoid dismissing employees as far as possible even during recession periods, while workloads in prosperous periods are covered by employees’ overtime instead of hiring new personnel. That is, employees regularly work overtime in return for job security. As a matter of fact, it has been said that



Source: The author, based on the data from Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training, "Work characteristics, personal characteristics and working hours" in JILPT Research Report no.128. 2011.

Note: N=2515

Figure 1. Reasons for working overtime among non-managerial employees (multiple responses)

companies establish their organizational structures for allocating personnel on the assumption that employees will work overtime.

Secondly, while ensuring the livelihood security of their employees, companies have also developed norms by which employees are expected to prioritize the company and their work over their private lives. In other words, companies have a community-like nature, and workers reflect this in their work ethics by placing a high value on diligence and commitment to the company as a member of that community. This has been noted as a factor behind long working hours. For example, there is a significant amount of overtime with no remuneration or an equivalent, which is referred to as *sābisu zangyō* ("service overtime" or unpaid overtime). Such overtime includes many cases of *mochikaeri zangyō* ("take-home overtime"), as workers take

work home because they are unable to complete it during working hours. Another type of overtime that is rooted in the community-like spirit of companies is cases in which workers continue working after the scheduled hours because they find it difficult to leave the workplace when their supervisor or colleagues are still working, a custom known as *tsukiai zangyō* ("collective overtime"). Furthermore, the scope of each worker's job is not clearly defined at Japanese companies, and most employees are expected to be generalists with a range of skills for handling various work scenarios. This, combined with the group-oriented values within companies, makes it difficult for workers to say that their work is finished.¹

"Service overtime"—even when workers seem to do it of their own accord—cannot be attributed to Japanese work ethics alone, as it is suggested that companies have demanded such ways of working

from their employees. Specifically, this indicates that personnel evaluations at Japanese companies often assess not only the employees' achievements, but also their levels of motivation and other such aspects of diligence. This prompts workers to throw themselves into highly demanding work schedules from a young age. In a sense, the fact that there are few workers venting dissatisfaction regarding "service overtime" can be attributed to this conventionally shared belief that such efforts will be rewarded in the long term.

As shown above, it is suggested that Japanese companies have expected their employees to adapt their ways of working to suit the needs of the company in return for stable, long-term employment and a salary scheme that considers living expenses. The Japanese-style employment system played a role in allowing Japan to accomplish its postwar high economic growth, and long working hours were an integral part of this system. Furthermore, the typical ways of working of male regular employees, in which working long hours is a given, were developed in close connection with the gender-based role division in the household. They are increasingly being recognized as outdated, as the number of women in employment is on the increase.

III. Tackling the problem of long working hours

Resolving the issue of long working hours is currently a topic of public interest and the target of policy development, toward the implementation of the Work Style Reform. While it is natural for individual companies to pursue efforts to reduce overtime, there is also a demand for the revision of industry-specific practices that lead to overwork.

Factors behind long working hours and their trends differ significantly from industry to industry. Looking at the breakdown by industry, the industry with the highest percentage of employees working 60 hours or more per week was transport and postal services (17.7%), followed by education (12.6%), and construction (10.7%) in 2017 (Figure 2). Among such industries in particular, it is common to work long hours.

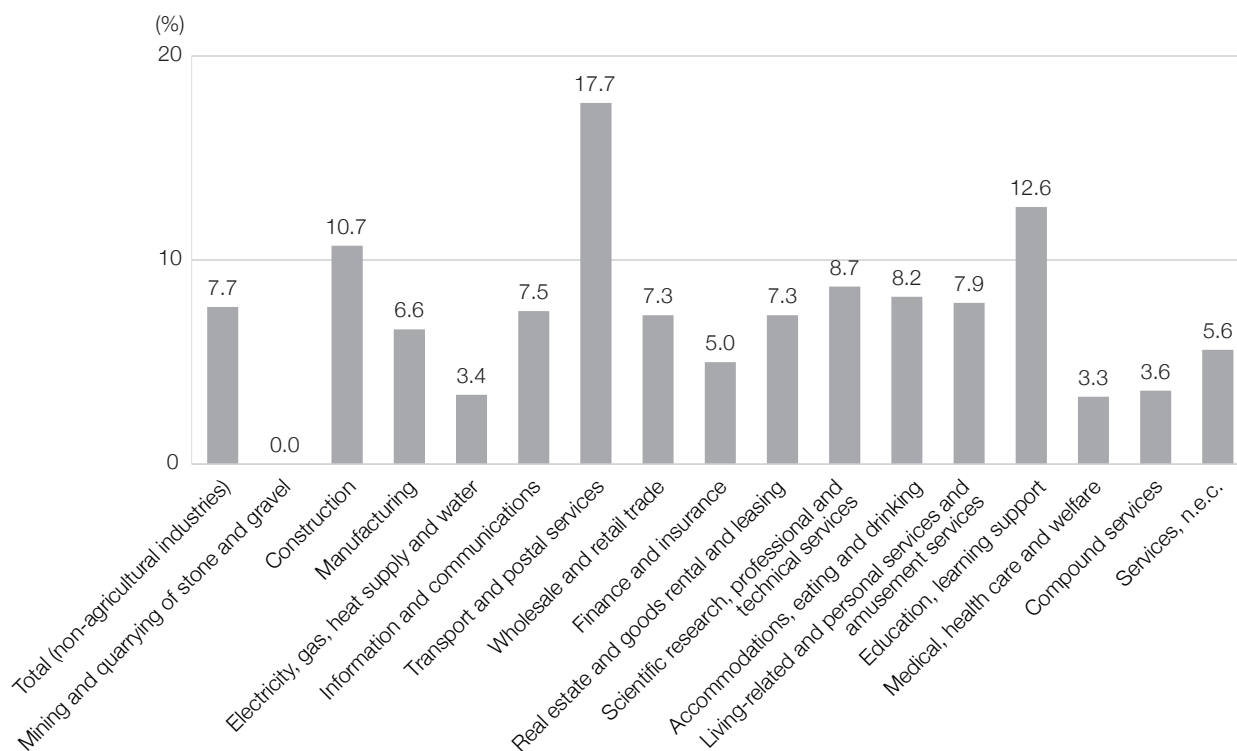
Why do workers in those industries work long hours? The problem is not uniform, because factors such as working customs and practices as well as employment management may be unique to the industry. Let us look at several industries in detail to explore these problems.

In the transport and postal services industry, a particular issue is the long working hours of drivers in truck transportation. The main factor behind them is a large amount of stand-by time—that is, waiting for cargo to be loaded at a loading point, and to be stored in a warehouse at the place of delivery. Efforts to shorten drivers' working hours therefore depend on the cooperation of the owners of cargo. Discussions are underway within the industry toward improvements.

When it comes to long working hours in the education industry, the working styles of elementary school and lower secondary school teachers have been an issue. Their long working hours may be a result of the wide range of tasks teachers may have to address. They not only teach classes and provide guidance for students but also prepare for classes, attend staff meetings, supervise extracurricular activities, organize grade reports, and carry out administrative tasks. As a result, many teachers frequently take their work home with them. The national government has launched deliberations on how to pursue reforms in teachers' working styles.

Long working hours in the construction industry can be largely attributed to the extremely limited number of days off, rather than long working hours per day. This is because tight schedules are regularly required to meet deadlines for the completion of construction work. To solve this issue fully is difficult because the actual execution of work may be affected by weather conditions. However, addressing the roots of the problem, that is, setting appropriate completion dates when placing or taking orders and managing the processes properly, is inevitable for the industry as a whole.

In addition to the above, in industries such as wholesale and retail trade as well as accommodations and eating and drinking, regular employees are excessively burdened by factors such as a shortage



Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications *Labour Force Survey*. Quoted in the 2018 White Paper on Measures to Prevent of *Karōshi* (Death Caused by Overwork), etc.

Note: Percentages among total employed persons, excluding those on leave at the time of the survey

Figure 2. Percentage of employed persons working 60 or more hours per week by industry

of personnel and the increasing percentage of non-regular employees in the workplace. As for industries such as information and communications, manufacturing, and finance and insurance, overly high targets and performance quotas as well as pressure to meet tight deadlines for clients or customers are noted as factors that lead to employees easily falling into taking on excessive workloads.²

As we have seen, overwork is largely affected by employment management and industry-specific working customs and practices. Many companies are currently responding to the government's efforts to promote the Work Style Reform and pursuing a number of initiatives to reduce overtime. There are issues, however, that cannot be solved with companies' internal initiatives alone. The question is how to tackle the fact that—even if a company makes efforts to improve its operational efficiency or places decisions on working hours at its employees'

discretion—many employees still have to work hard in order to respond promptly to customers' needs.³ Simply making changes to the legal system will not be enough. It is also necessary to readdress the employment system, industry practices, and other such key factors.

Notes

1. Regarding the typical characteristics of Japanese companies, such as their emphasis on generalist skills and group-oriented nature, see Sugimoto (2003, 94–100).
2. Regarding the differences in working hour-related issues by industry, see Takami (2017).
3. Regarding overwork to respond to the needs of customers, see Takami (2018), which examines how some professionals (IT engineers, etc.) have to pursue their work to be responsible for customers and end up working long hours. Subjective indicators also suggest that they tend to overwork, even if their company or supervisor allows them to determine their hours on their own.

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This is a series of three articles on the topic of overwork in Japan. Part I (July issue) looks at the characteristics of working hours and investigates the background to the topic by addressing the regulations. Part III (November issue) will consider the distinctive features of overwork at present and the measures that need to be adopted against it.

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