

Report

Results of the Eighth “Survey on Working Life” from JILPT Fixed-Point Survey

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I. Introduction

Since 1999, the Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (JILPT) has conducted a fixed-point attitude survey titled “the Survey on Working Life” in order to clarify various aspects of workers’ awareness. This paper introduces the results of the most recent 2021 survey, focusing on awareness related to so-called “Japanese-style employment practices,” as well as workers’ perspectives on career development and the ideal form of society Japan should aim for. It examines workers’ awareness from perspectives such as lifetime employment, seniority-based wages, and a sense of unity with the organization (Sections II–V); career development within a single company versus across multiple companies (Sections VI); and preferences for an egalitarian society versus a competitive society (Section VII).

This was the eighth such survey, following those conducted in 1999, 2000, 2001, 2004, 2007, 2011, and 2015, enabling us to trace changes in workers’ awareness over time. The survey was conducted using a placement method through home visits by surveyors. The sample consisted of 4,000 men and women aged 20 and over, drawn through stratified two-stage random sampling from the Basic Resident Register. Responses were obtained from 2,388 individuals (valid response rate: 59.7%).

II. Awareness of “lifetime employment,” “seniority-based wages,” and “sense of unity with the organization”

Let us take a look at trends in support rate for the three core elements of Japanese-style employment practices: “lifetime employment” (long-term employment at a single company until *teinen*¹ [mandatory retirement]), “seniority-based wages” (a pay system in which salary increases with years of continuous service), and “sense of unity with the organization” (a feeling of belonging to the company or workplace). Here, support rate refers to the combined percentage of respondents who answered “I think it’s a good thing” or “If anything, I think it’s a good thing” (this definition applies throughout).

The support rate for “lifetime employment” exceeded 70% in the initial 1999 survey at 72.3%, rose above 80% in 2007 to 86.1%, and reached nearly 90% in the previous 2015 survey at 87.9%. However, this marked the peak, and in the most recent 2021 survey, the support rate declined by more than 5 percentage points to 82.0%. As for “sense of unity with the organization,” the support rate for this item, similarly “lifetime employment,” continued to rise since the start of the survey, reaching approximately 90% in the previous 2015 survey at 88.9%. This also peaked in 2015, falling to 87.2% in the 2021 survey. However, the decline was only 1.7 percentage points, and thus not large.

In terms of wages, the support rate for “seniority-based wages” showed a consistent upward trend from the start of the survey, peaking at 76.3% in 2015. However, in the 2021 survey, this figure fell by 5.9 percentage points to 70.4%. In summary, although

the support rate for these items of Japanese-style employment practices had steadily increased since the start of the survey, the 2021 results mark a notable reversal (Figure 1).

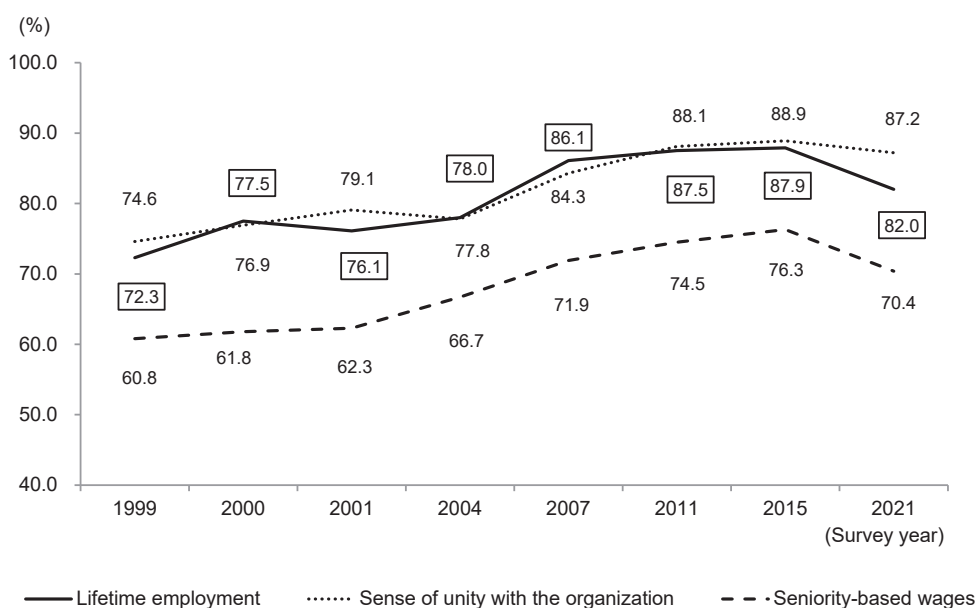


Figure 1. Trends in support rate for Japanese-style employment practices

III. Support for “lifetime employment” (Trends by age group)

Looking at the support rate for “lifetime employment” in more detail by age group in the 2021 survey, we find that the percentage rises with age—from 75.1% among those in their 20s to 88.5% among those aged 70 and over, with older age groups showing higher levels of support. In the previous survey (2015), the support rate for “lifetime employment” was nearly 90% across all age groups, with virtually no variation by age. In the 2021 survey, however, the gap by age group has widened.

Looking at trends over time by age group reveals a clear pattern through the 2004 survey: the older the respondent, the stronger the support rate for “lifetime employment.” In the 2007 survey, however, the support rate among people in their 20s and 30s rose by more than 10 percentage points, pushing support

rate above 80% in all age groups and significantly narrowing the age gap. The 2015 survey saw the gap shrink even further. But in the 2021 survey, it appears a clear age-based gap, with the support rate for “lifetime employment” rising along with age (Table 1).

IV. Support for “seniority-based wages” (Trends by age group)

When we examine the details of the support rate for “seniority-based wages” by age group, the percentage is in the 60% range for the working-age population aged 20 to 59 and in the 70% range for the elderly aged 60 and over, both of which are high levels. However, compared to the previous survey in 2015, the support rate fell across all age groups. The drop was especially notable among people in their 40s and 50s, with decreases of 10.0 and 7.0 percentage

Table 1. Lifetime employment

(unit: %)

| Survey year | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2004 | 2007 | 2011 | 2015 | 2021 |
|------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Total | 72.3 | 77.5 | 76.1 | 78.0 | 86.1 | 87.5 | 87.9 | 82.0 |
| Men | 71.2 | 75.8 | 74.7 | 77.2 | 86.3 | 87.4 | 87.0 | 81.3 |
| Women | 73.3 | 78.8 | 77.4 | 78.8 | 85.9 | 87.5 | 88.6 | 82.7 |
| Ages 20–29 | 67.0 | 73.5 | 64.0 | 65.3 | 81.1 | 84.6 | 87.3 | 75.1 |
| Ages 30–39 | 69.1 | 72.0 | 72.6 | 72.1 | 85.9 | 86.4 | 88.4 | 78.0 |
| Ages 40–49 | 70.8 | 77.3 | 74.6 | 76.9 | 86.5 | 87.8 | 88.6 | 78.5 |
| Ages 50–59 | 71.0 | 77.1 | 78.9 | 80.0 | 86.0 | 85.2 | 88.1 | 81.3 |
| Ages 60–69 | 75.4 | 80.1 | 78.4 | 82.6 | 86.5 | 89.8 | 88.1 | 84.1 |
| Ages 70 and over | 83.2 | 84.0 | 85.0 | 85.4 | 87.7 | 88.7 | 87.1 | 88.5 |

Table 2. Seniority-based wages

(unit: %)

| Survey year | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2004 | 2007 | 2011 | 2015 | 2021 |
|------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Total | 60.8 | 61.8 | 62.3 | 66.7 | 71.9 | 74.5 | 76.3 | 70.4 |
| Men | 58.5 | 58.4 | 59.8 | 65.3 | 73.3 | 74.6 | 74.7 | 69.7 |
| Women | 62.8 | 64.7 | 64.4 | 68.0 | 70.8 | 74.4 | 77.7 | 71.0 |
| Ages 20–29 | 56.2 | 54.5 | 54.1 | 56.1 | 75.5 | 74.5 | 72.6 | 69.1 |
| Ages 30–39 | 56.8 | 57.7 | 55.8 | 62.3 | 63.8 | 73.1 | 72.8 | 66.5 |
| Ages 40–49 | 55.3 | 58.2 | 61.5 | 66.4 | 68.2 | 70.2 | 73.7 | 63.7 |
| Ages 50–59 | 60.2 | 61.3 | 61.8 | 67.4 | 72.0 | 73.0 | 76.2 | 69.2 |
| Ages 60–69 | 66.9 | 67.9 | 67.4 | 69.5 | 72.4 | 75.5 | 75.7 | 72.3 |
| Ages 70 and over | 73.0 | 70.1 | 72.0 | 74.5 | 79.1 | 80.2 | 82.1 | 77.4 |

points, respectively.

Looking at the historical trends, similar to “lifetime employment,” the support rate for “seniority-based wages” consistently increased with age up until the 2004 survey. However, in the 2007 survey, the support rate among respondents in their 20s jumped by around 20 percentage points, and in the 2011 survey, the support rate among those in their 30s rose by about 10 percentage points. These shifts dramatically narrowed the gap between age groups (Table 2).

V. Support for “sense of unity with the organization” (Trends by age group)

In the 2021 survey, the support rate for “sense of unity with the organization” shows relatively slight variation across age groups. However, it is notable that respondents in their 20s, who had shown the

highest level of support since the 2007 survey, ranked lowest in the 2021 survey. In the previous survey (2015), the working-age population aged 20 to 50, which had a support rate of over 90%, has seen a noticeable decline across the board.

Looking at the time series, since the first survey, the support rate for “sense of unity with the organization” has consistently been lower among seniors aged 70 and over compared to other age groups. Other than that, there had been a minor difference by age group until now. However, from the 2007 survey onward—compared to the 2004 survey—the support rate among those in their 20s and 30s increased sharply by more than 10 percentage points, resulting in a higher support rate among the entire working-age population. This trend continued in the 2011 and 2015 surveys.

Looking at the results by gender, it is notable that since the first survey, men have consistently shown a

Table 3. Sense of unity with the organization

| Survey year | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2004 | 2007 | 2011 | 2015 | 2021 |
|------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Total | 74.6 | 76.9 | 79.1 | 77.8 | 84.3 | 88.1 | 88.9 | 87.2 |
| Men | 81.0 | 82.6 | 85.1 | 82.9 | 89.8 | 90.8 | 91.3 | 90.2 |
| Women | 69.1 | 72.2 | 73.9 | 73.2 | 80.0 | 85.9 | 87.0 | 84.4 |
| Ages 20–29 | 79.2 | 80.2 | 84.5 | 75.3 | 92.3 | 93.6 | 94.3 | 85.4 |
| Ages 30–39 | 79.1 | 80.3 | 81.2 | 78.9 | 91.1 | 93.6 | 92.0 | 86.0 |
| Ages 40–49 | 73.5 | 76.0 | 77.1 | 82.1 | 89.9 | 92.9 | 91.8 | 87.8 |
| Ages 50–59 | 73.1 | 76.6 | 79.1 | 76.1 | 81.3 | 85.2 | 92.7 | 88.8 |
| Ages 60–69 | 73.7 | 77.3 | 79.9 | 80.3 | 82.1 | 85.5 | 86.6 | 87.5 |
| Ages 70 and over | 69.1 | 70.9 | 73.4 | 72.6 | 75.9 | 82.1 | 83.1 | 86.6 |

(unit: %)

higher support rate than women. This reflects a stronger sense of belonging to their company or organization among male respondents (Table 3).

VI. Awareness on career development

The typical career development model associated with Japanese-style employment practices involves long-term employment at a single company until mandatory retirement (*teinen*), during which workers accumulate skills.

Since the first survey in 1999, the proportion of respondents who view “single-company career” model as desirable has consistently remained high and shown an upward trend, reaching a majority (50.9%) in the 2015 survey. However, in the latest 2021 survey, this figure fell sharply to 36.6%, a defining feature of that year.

In contrast, the proportion favoring a “multi-company career” rose significantly to 32.4% in the 2021 survey. While this figure had remained relatively stable since the first survey in 1999, it increased by 9.3 percentage points in the 2021 survey, showing growth that is approaching the level of support for “single-company careers.”

The share of respondents favoring an “independent self-employed career”—pursuing work independently as a business owner or freelancer—has gradually declined since the start of the survey, falling below 10% for the first time to 9.5% in the 2021 survey (Figure 2).

Looking at the percentage of respondents who

chose “single-company career” by age group over time, the surveys up to 2007 show that support rate tended to be slightly higher among middle-aged and older groups (those in their 50s to 70s and above) than among younger groups. However, in the 2011 survey, the percentage of respondents in their 20s who supported a “single-company career” rose sharply—by more than 10 percentage points—narrowing the gap between age groups.

In contrast, the 2021 survey showed a significant drop of 10 to 20 points across all age groups, with particularly large declines among the working-age population (those in their 20s to 50s) (Table 4).

Until the 2007 survey, the proportion of respondents favoring “multi-company career” tended to be higher among younger age groups, showing a trend opposite to that of “single-company career.” However, in the 2011 survey, the support rate for “multi-company career” among people in their 20s dropped significantly—by about 15 percentage points—diminishing the previously clear tendency for younger respondents to favor this career path.

In the 2021 survey, the support rate for “multi-company career” rose across all age groups, increasing by 7 to 10 percentage points. While the support rate remained high among working-age population, as it had in the past surveys, it also grew among those aged 60 and over. As a result, the traditional age-based differences in preferences have largely disappeared (Table 5).

Overall, the long-standing pattern—where the preference for “single-company career” increased

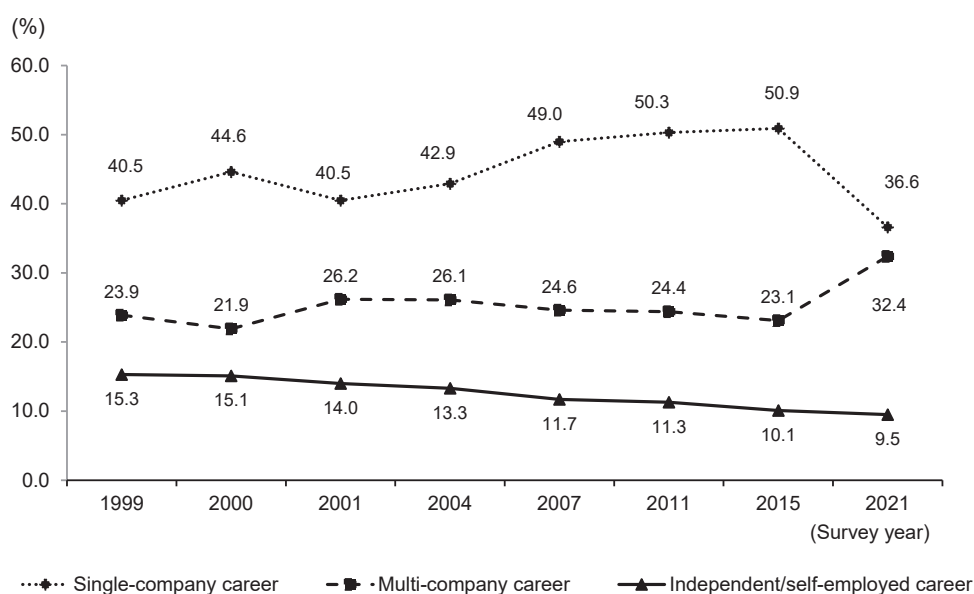


Figure 2. Desired career development

Table 4. Single-company career

(unit: %)

| Survey year | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2004 | 2007 | 2011 | 2015 | 2021 |
|------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Total | 40.5 | 44.6 | 40.5 | 42.9 | 49.0 | 50.3 | 50.9 | 36.6 |
| Men | 39.6 | 45.8 | 41.4 | 41.8 | 51.1 | 51.6 | 50.3 | 38.4 |
| Women | 41.3 | 43.6 | 39.7 | 44.0 | 47.4 | 49.1 | 51.4 | 34.9 |
| Ages 20–29 | 36.6 | 44.1 | 38.9 | 33.9 | 40.3 | 51.1 | 54.8 | 38.6 |
| Ages 30–39 | 42.6 | 40.1 | 34.9 | 41.0 | 45.1 | 46.7 | 49.3 | 34.7 |
| Ages 40–49 | 38.7 | 40.6 | 37.2 | 36.6 | 50.9 | 48.0 | 53.1 | 30.0 |
| Ages 50–59 | 40.1 | 41.6 | 40.4 | 45.2 | 48.9 | 49.7 | 48.2 | 35.0 |
| Ages 60–69 | 42.3 | 48.9 | 48.4 | 45.9 | 49.6 | 52.1 | 50.6 | 38.5 |
| Ages 70 and over | 43.1 | 53.0 | 41.8 | 51.2 | 53.9 | 53.4 | 51.0 | 41.8 |

Table 5. Multi-company career

(unit: %)

| Survey year | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2004 | 2007 | 2011 | 2015 | 2021 |
|------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Total | 23.9 | 21.9 | 26.2 | 26.1 | 24.6 | 24.4 | 23.1 | 32.4 |
| Men | 24.4 | 21.5 | 25.2 | 25.4 | 23.5 | 23.0 | 24.1 | 28.9 |
| Women | 23.4 | 22.3 | 27.1 | 26.8 | 25.4 | 25.6 | 22.3 | 35.6 |
| Ages 20–29 | 33.5 | 29.9 | 36.6 | 35.4 | 42.9 | 28.2 | 26.8 | 35.6 |
| Ages 30–39 | 31.5 | 30.4 | 37.4 | 35.7 | 32.8 | 33.9 | 27.9 | 37.3 |
| Ages 40–49 | 26.8 | 27.0 | 30.3 | 33.4 | 28.4 | 27.6 | 30.2 | 39.6 |
| Ages 50–59 | 21.3 | 22.9 | 22.9 | 24.4 | 22.7 | 28.8 | 29.6 | 37.4 |
| Ages 60–69 | 18.0 | 14.9 | 19.7 | 20.0 | 21.8 | 20.4 | 19.5 | 30.4 |
| Ages 70 and over | 10.2 | 7.3 | 12.7 | 11.4 | 11.8 | 12.2 | 13.3 | 20.4 |

with age and the preference for “multi-company career” decreased—began to break down from the 2011 survey onward. In the 2021 survey, the proportion of respondents in their 20s who favored “single-company career” was the highest among the working-age population (38.6%). In contrast, support for “multi-company career” among people in their 20s was the lowest among all working-age population (35.6%), marking a significant shift in the landscape.

VII. The ideal society Japan should aim for

When asked about the kind of society Japan should aim for, 37.2% of respondents chose “an egalitarian society with minimal wealth disparity,” while 31.6% preferred “a competitive society where people can freely compete based on their motivation and abilities.”

Looking at the historical trends since the first survey, until the 2004 survey, the proportion of respondents choosing “a society where people can freely compete based on motivation and ability” exceeded that of those favoring “an egalitarian society with little disparity between rich and poor” by about 10 percentage points. In the 2007 survey,

this trend reversed, with “the egalitarian society” surpassing “the competitive society” by more than 10 points. In the 2011 survey, the order of preference remained the same, but the gap narrowed. From the 2011 survey, the proportions remained at roughly the same levels through the 2015 and 2021 surveys (Figure 3).

Looking at support rate for “an egalitarian society with minimal disparities between rich and poor” by age group, the support rate among younger and middle-aged respondents in their 20s, 30s, and 40s is in the low 30% range (33.5%, 32.2%, and 31.1%, respectively). In contrast, among older respondents in their 50s, 60s, and 70s and above, the rate is around 40% (38.5%, 38.0%, and 44.3%, respectively), indicating a difference by age group.

Even when viewed over time, while there are fluctuations in the overall levels, the general trend of differing preferences between younger/middle-aged and older generations remains unchanged. Looking at the data by gender, 32.7% of men support “an egalitarian society,” compared to 41.5% of women, showing a substantial difference in thinking between the sexes (Table 6).

Looking at support rate for “a society where

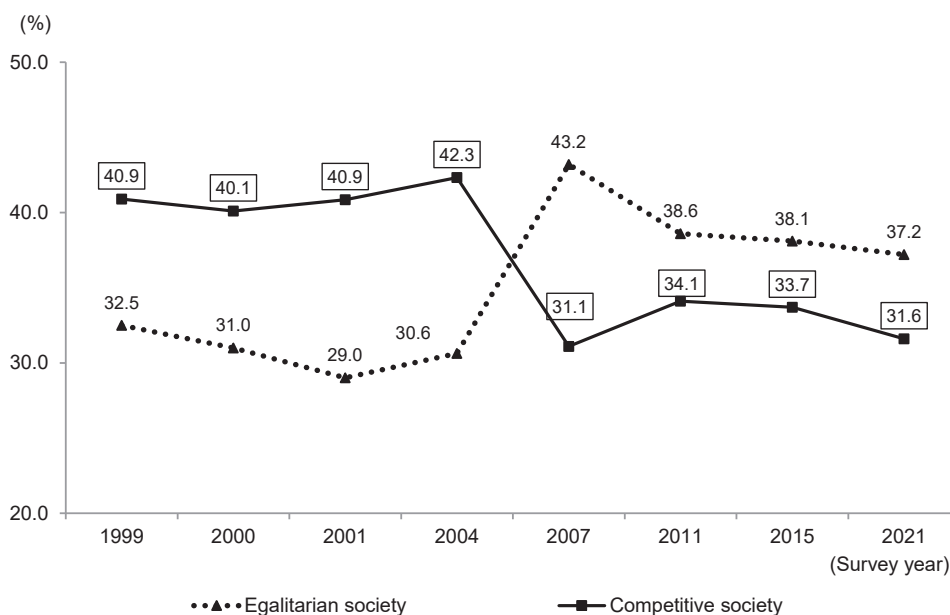


Figure 3. The ideal society Japan should aim for

Table 6. Egalitarian society

(unit: %)

| Survey year | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2004 | 2007 | 2011 | 2015 | 2021 |
|------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Total | 32.5 | 31.0 | 29.0 | 30.6 | 43.2 | 38.6 | 38.1 | 37.2 |
| Men | 26.9 | 25.9 | 24.7 | 27.4 | 41.8 | 34.7 | 34.0 | 32.7 |
| Women | 37.3 | 35.1 | 32.7 | 33.5 | 44.4 | 41.8 | 41.5 | 41.5 |
| Ages 20–29 | 26.0 | 27.8 | 24.8 | 23.2 | 38.3 | 31.9 | 29.3 | 33.5 |
| Ages 30–39 | 29.1 | 25.8 | 24.7 | 25.1 | 38.8 | 35.0 | 29.3 | 32.2 |
| Ages 40–49 | 30.8 | 27.3 | 28.3 | 32.5 | 38.7 | 34.6 | 32.4 | 31.1 |
| Ages 50–59 | 33.3 | 32.7 | 32.8 | 30.7 | 44.2 | 43.1 | 37.2 | 38.5 |
| Ages 60–69 | 36.7 | 35.5 | 31.1 | 32.6 | 48.2 | 41.1 | 43.5 | 38.0 |
| Ages 70 and over | 39.8 | 35.4 | 29.4 | 36.9 | 46.1 | 41.2 | 45.6 | 44.3 |

Table 7. Competitive society

(unit: %)

| Survey year | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2004 | 2007 | 2011 | 2015 | 2021 |
|------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Total | 40.9 | 40.1 | 40.9 | 42.3 | 31.1 | 34.1 | 33.7 | 31.6 |
| Men | 50.0 | 48.8 | 49.8 | 50.6 | 37.4 | 41.7 | 39.9 | 36.9 |
| Women | 32.9 | 33.0 | 33.3 | 34.8 | 26.1 | 27.7 | 28.6 | 26.6 |
| Ages 20–29 | 50.1 | 43.9 | 49.8 | 50.2 | 43.9 | 48.9 | 51.0 | 40.8 |
| Ages 30–39 | 43.7 | 48.7 | 45.1 | 49.0 | 34.5 | 39.7 | 46.7 | 39.4 |
| Ages 40–49 | 47.3 | 44.1 | 42.4 | 42.5 | 35.0 | 33.9 | 35.5 | 35.4 |
| Ages 50–59 | 42.6 | 41.8 | 40.4 | 43.3 | 29.6 | 31.4 | 32.0 | 28.0 |
| Ages 60–69 | 33.5 | 33.7 | 39.3 | 40.8 | 28.6 | 31.9 | 29.5 | 27.1 |
| Ages 70 and over | 23.0 | 29.1 | 28.8 | 30.1 | 23.6 | 28.0 | 24.7 | 27.8 |

people can freely compete based on motivation and ability” by age group, support rate tends to be higher among younger age groups overall, with about 40 % (40.8%) of those in their 20s expressing support. This general tendency is also evident in the time-series data. There is also a substantial gender gap: 36.9% of men support “a competitive society,” a relatively prominent level and significantly more than the 26.6% of women who support it (Table 7).

VIII. In lieu of a conclusion

This report has presented the results of the fixed-point survey on workers’ awareness regarding not only toward so-called “Japanese-style employment practices,” but also toward career development and ideal form of society Japan should aim for. The results have been presented using the key themes:

“lifetime employment, seniority-based wages, and a sense of unity with the organization,” “career development within a single company versus across multiple companies,” and “an egalitarian society versus a competitive society.”

A common pattern across these areas is the significant shift observed in the 2007 survey. This period overlapped with prolonged economic stagnation following the collapse of the bubble economy, and with the onset of the global financial crisis that began with the U.S. subprime mortgage collapse and led to the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers.

Against this backdrop, since the 2007 survey, the support rate for traditional notions such as “Japanese-style employment practices,” “career development within a single company,” and “an egalitarian society” rose sharply among younger respondents—

who had previously been more inclined to hold non-traditional views than other age groups. As a result, the overall support rate for traditional values grew, and generational differences in attitudes narrowed.

In the 2021 survey, traditional views still dominated overall, but there was a slight shift among younger respondents toward more non-traditional values. Generational differences in awareness have started to reemerge. Regardless of economic trends, the employment landscape is expected to grow increasingly unstable, driven by technological advancements such as AI and greater fluidity in the labor market.

Japanese-style employment practices are also beginning to visibly break down in practice, as seen in the growing number of companies adopting job-based employment with *shokumukyu* (job-based pay). Still, as long as anxiety about these changes persists, the proportion of people—especially older

generations—who continue to support traditional values is likely to remain high for the time being.

Note

1. *Teinen* refers to a system in which the employment relationship is mandatorily terminated when an employee reaches an age specified by the company. The mandatory retirement age at the majority of Japanese firms is 60.

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