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Final Project Prospectus Draft 3

TITLE: Exploring Japanese and American Cultures in the Context of the Workplace

Abstract

For my final project I will participate in an internship in Tokyo, Japan at a software company where I can gain experience in my field while learning about what it is like to work in Japan. Japanese culture differs from American culture in many regards, and I will do research about the aspects that are similar and dissimilar, and also conduct interviews with Japanese employees as well as international employees at my company and other software companies in order to hear their experiences with colliding cultures. I will also research specifically about the work culture of Japan and how it differs from America with respect to the concepts of lifetime employment, *sābisu zangyō* (service overtime work), and *karōshi* (death from overwork).

Introduction

For my final project I will participate in an internship in Japan at a software company where I can gain experience in my field while learning about what it is like to work in Japan. I have heard stories, specifically about working in Japan as a video game developer or a *sararīman*, Japan's term for a salaried employee, that sound less than ideal, for example long unpaid overtime hours. However, I have also heard that these are outdated stories and conditions have improved and become less detrimental to workers' mental and physical health. Because I have heard both sides of this argument, I want to dive deeper and see what the work culture of Japan is actually like. I have two research questions (RQs):

RQ1: Why are rumors about the Japanese work culture so prevalent in American culture, and are they misconceptions or reality? As I conduct research, I will focus on topics such as having a high working hour average or working a lot of unpaid overtime hours.

RQ2: How has the coronavirus pandemic affected the work life balance of employees?

In addition to doing research, I will conduct interviews with Japanese employees as well as international employees at my company and other software companies in order to hear their experiences regarding cultural differences and synthesize my own experiences in order to answer these questions.

Aspects of Japanese Work Culture

In America, it is normal for a person to hold several different jobs throughout their lifetime. In Japan, this is also fairly normal for some workers. However, Japan also has the concept of *shūshin koyō* or lifetime employment, typically attributed to *sararīman*. Lifetime employment is not an official type of employment nor is it a guarantee. It is best thought of as a “long-term commitment between workers and employers rather than as a permanent employment contract” (Ono 2). Companies will employ new graduates right out of college, and individuals will work at that company until retirement. According to the 2000 Japanese General Social Survey (JGSS) and the 1998 General Social Survey (GSS) in the United States, the number of jobs held by individuals living in the United States are at the least double that of individuals living in Japan (see table 1). In Japan, adults between the ages of 20-24 hold approximately 1.3 full-time jobs, whereas in the US, 2.6 full-time jobs are held. Between the ages of 25-34, 1.7 jobs are held in Japan while in the US, 4.4 jobs are held. A common analogy used to describe the concept of lifetime employment is that of a family, which is also one of the four types of corporate culture as proposed by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner. In this analogy, the new graduate is an infant and the hiring company is the family who will take care of the new hire as they grow in the company. The company offers job security and as a result a sense of loyalty to the company develops as “[t]he relationship to the corporation is long-term and devoted”

	Japan (2000)			US (1998)		
	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women
<i>Number of full-time jobs held</i>						
20–24	1.3	1.4	1.3	2.6	2.2	3.1
25–34	1.7	1.7	1.7	4.4	4.8	4.0
35–44	2.0	2.2	1.8	5.1	5.8	4.5
45–54	2.0	2.1	1.8	5.3	5.6	5.0

Table 1: Number of full-time jobs held in Japan and the United States. Source: Ono, Hiroshi. “Lifetime Employment in Japan: Concepts and Measurements.” *Journal of the Japanese and International Economies*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2010, pp. 1–27.

(Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 163). It is also this sense of loyalty that drives employees “to do *more* than a contract or agreement obliges [them] to” (163).

Geert Hofstede’s model of cultural dimensions lists six dimensions that are used to characterize and understand different cultures. One of these dimensions is the “Individualism versus Collectivism” index. Japan’s index for this dimension is low, meaning that it leans closer to being a collectivist society (Hofstede 315). In other words, instead of pursuing independence as someone would in the United States, which is an individualist society, more of a focus is put on interdependence, working together, and being responsible for each other. Using the family analogy, Haru Yamada states:

[T]he Japanese workplace fosters familial interdependence. Instead of dividing office space into individually bounded rooms or cubicles ... it is left open, in a bullpen. Another example of familial interdependence is the Japanese manager’s role in creating an environment in which employees perceive themselves as working together for a common goal (56).

Because everyone works together to accomplish a goal, it can be assumed that if a team is working on a project to meet a deadline, until the project is completed, everyone will continue to work on it, even if it means leaving the office late or working overtime. You do not want to be the only person who leaves early while your other teammates stay and work, because you will

not be considered a team player. This is because Japan is a collectivist society, and there is social pressure to not do what is best for yourself, but to do what is best for the bigger group, even if that means working longer hours or not utilizing holiday leave. In an interview with an engineer working for a technology company in Japan, the engineer said, “I cannot be the only person taking time off work.” He also said, “It’s natural not taking holiday leave.” Hiroshi Ono, a specialist in Japan’s work culture and a professor at Hitotsubashi University, mentions that many workers will not take holiday leave because their bosses do not take holiday leave, and also because they do not want to disrupt the group’s harmony (Demetriou).

Misconceptions about Japanese Work Culture

I want to preface this section by saying that many aspects of Japanese work culture are not representative of every company in Japan, since every industry is different and not all companies have similar views regarding management and treatment of employees. When I have mentioned to people that I wanted to work in Japan I have been told, “You know they work crazy hours in Japan, right?” or “I’ve heard that it’s hard to get a job in Japan, and even if you do, the work environment isn’t great,” and other similar things. While these responses were specifically about working in Japan as a video game developer, they can also be said about the *sararīman*. Doing a simple Internet search on “japan long working hours” returns article titles such as “Japan has some of the longest working hours in the world,” “Are long work hours in Japan an exaggeration by the West?” and “Why do Japanese work such long hours?” Clearly there is skepticism about whether Japan imposes long work hours, and there are many who believe this to be the case. But without any background and supporting information, an

Average annual hours actually worked per worker					
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Japan	1719	1714	1709	1680	1644
US	1783	1778	1778	1783	1779

Table 2: Average annual hours actually worked per worker in Japan and the United States for the last five years. Source: OECD 2020, LFS – Average Annual Hours Worked, els.contact@oecd.org <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DatasetCode=ANHRS>. Accessed on 24 March 2021.

individual could read these article titles and take them at face value without knowing that this is not the case for all companies.

Long Working Hours in Japan

One major point of concern of working overseas is the idea that people in Japan work more hours on average than people in the United States. According to data gathered from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development for the past five years, not only do people in the United States work more hours annually, but the average number of hours worked by people in Japan have decreased each year (see table 2). Why is it then that people make blanket statements like this?

As mentioned previously, rather than being individualistic, Japan has a collectivist society and therefore people will put their team, company, and country before themselves. If you act selfishly or independently, you will lose face for not doing what is best for the group. Because of the collectivist attitude and the familial nature of the workplace, there is an obligation for employees to work longer hours or even take their work home with them to finish a project or meet a deadline. However, there is the caveat that this typically only applies to *salarīman*. Furthermore, for employees with lifetime employment there is a sense of loyalty to the company that is “taking care” of them, and in return they give the company more of their time.

Some companies require their employees to work unpaid overtime, known as *sābisu zangyō* or “service overtime work.” Many times, companies will say that overtime pay is included in your monthly salary, but this can just be a way for companies to require you to work overtime without any additional pay, and then claim that you are already being compensated for it. In 2006, there was data documenting that 40% of workers did not receive compensation for their overtime work (Nemoto 515). A translation of Japan’s Labor Standards Act Article 32-4-2 states, “In the event that . . . an Employer has a Worker work during the applicable period for a period shorter than said applicable period, and the average weekly hours the Employer has the Worker work exceeds 40 hours, the Employer shall pay Premium Wages for the working hours that exceed 40 hours . . .” (“Labor Standards Act”). While it is illegal to withhold overtime compensation from employees according to this Act, there are companies, for instance Dentsu Inc., that are guilty of it, and this is referred to as *burakku kigyō*, which means a business that exploits or harasses its employees, for example through unpaid overtime work.

Burakku kigyō and Underreported Work Hours

The data I have shown in Table 2 suggests that employees in America, in fact, work more hours than employees in Japan. However, given that there are businesses that exploit their employees by underreporting their work hours, it is possible this is the cause of the rumors suggesting that employees in Japan work more hours, overtime or not, despite data not reflecting those claims. According to a 2016 article in *The Japan Times*, more than 30 employees at the Japanese company Dentsu Inc. disclosed that their monthly overtime work was 100 hours more than what they had actually reported (“At Least 30 Dentsu Workers Underreported Overtime by over 100 Hours: Sources.”). This information came to light one year after Dentsu employee

Matsuri Takahashi committed suicide after developing symptoms of depression from working 105 hours of overtime per month. The company forced her to report that her overtime work did not exceed the 70-hour limit. Situations like these are not uncommon in Japan as during the same year, an employee of the Subaru Corporation committed suicide as a result of overwork. The company admitted that it did not compensate over 3,400 employees for their overtime work over the course of two years in which employees were forced to underrepresent their overtime work hours. The existence of *burakku kigyō* gives rise to another major problem in many countries, and that is *karōshi*.

Karōshi, Death by Overwork

Many Japanese employees have been victims of *karōshi*, a term coined in the 1980s which translates to death by overwork but can also refer to cases of permanent disability resulting from overwork, and even suicide. In 1991, The National Defense Counsel for Victims of Karoshi, a national hotline network devoted to ending *karōshi*, “estimate[d] that more than 10,000 people die from cardiovascular disease related to overwork each year” (Totsuka). In 1992, the Law of Temporary Measures to Promote Reduction of Working Hours was put into place to reduce the number of working hours allowed for employees to 1800 hours which helped to reduce some of the consequences of long working hours including workaholism, unbalanced work-family life, and other psychological problems (Kanai 210, 213). To further combat the problems associated with long working hours and *karōshi*, the Death from Overwork Prevention Countermeasure Promotion Law was passed in 2014 and in 2016, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe gave a speech “declaring that ‘[Japanese government’s] biggest challenge is work style reform. We will improve long working hours’” (Kawashima 171). As a result of this reform, several

companies in Japan have been working to reduce the number of overtime hours an employee may work, make sure employees take their paid time off, and start rating productivity based on number of tasks completed (Koizumi). However, some managers are suffering from the reform because they are now working extra overtime in place of their subordinates to ensure jobs get completed (Baseel). Furthermore, even with the implementation of these laws, that does not necessarily mean that managers will stop forcing their employees to underreport their work hours to get around these laws.

Interview with Engineer Working in Japan

In December 2020, I had the opportunity to interview Rob Sherling, a system engineer who works as a freelancer in Tokyo, Japan. He wrote an article in 2019 titled, “Working in Japan: Myths, Realities, Compensation, Culture (By A Software Engineer)” and I wanted to ask him about his experiences working in Japan, how the work culture differs from America, and what kinds of rumors he had heard. The interview was conducted in Japanese and then transcribed into English.

When I asked Mr. Sherling if he had heard any rumors regarding working in Japan, he told me he would typically hear comments such as “There’s a lot of overtime work” and “Companies don’t really treat their employees well.” In his experience working in Japan and having other acquaintances who work in Japan, he let me know that long overtime hours was not a rumor but the reality, and that it depends on the company and the industry. For instance, if you work at an English conversation school there will not be much overtime work, but if you are working in sales the overtime work can be onerous. He also confirmed that some companies

practice *sābisu zangyō* and if he is interviewed by a company that says they practice this, he immediately turns down the job.

Mr. Sherling told me that companies, rather than telling you directly to work overtime, might say “We’re very busy so let’s all try to work harder.” This statement validates several theories and concepts I have talked about in this paper. As Japan is a collectivist society, and companies tend to follow the “family” model, working hard and doing your best to not be a burden to your fellow coworkers is the norm. Furthermore, because Japan is a high context society, a company will not directly tell you to work extra overtime, but rather mention that it is a busy time and then expect you to read between the lines, or as Japanese refer to it as *kūki-o-yomu* or “reading the air/situation.”

Effect of the Pandemic on the Work Culture

In response to the coronavirus pandemic, many more employees are working from home remotely. This is a relief for many as they no longer must deal with commuting, and they can work from the comfort of their home. However, this also raises the possibility of further tilting the work-life balance in work’s favor. My initial hypothesis was that because employees are working from home more regularly, they will spend more time on the clock working, or even find themselves doing work after they have “clocked out.” My reasoning was that it can be very easy to start checking and replying to emails after hours or start working on a work-related problem since your work is right there in front of you. After reading an article discussing the coronavirus pandemic’s effect on Japan’s work culture, which I will go into detail in the following paragraph, I found, to my surprise, that my hypothesis does not always hold. There are employees who, even though the number of hours they work are not increasing, are more

productive and happier working remotely. However, there are also cases where the boundary between work and life is further blurred because the change.

The corporate culture in Japan has been one in which employees work long hours and find themselves too exhausted to take care of their families and where managers put too much focus on the number of hours logged rather than the amount of work actually being completed (Smith). However, with the new social distancing measures in order and more people working from home, we can see many benefits. As employees work from home, a culture of productivity is being encouraged. Managers now must measure productivity on the amount of work and number of tasks completed as opposed to the number of hours spent in the office. “Japan’s outmoded, inefficient corporate culture is one of the country’s main obstacles to regaining lost competitiveness, raising productivity and creating a more accommodating work-life balance. Remote work could be the shock that Japan’s corporate culture needs” (Smith). In addition to increased productivity, working from home has also made it easier for employees to spend more time with their families, not to mention the extra time saved from not having to commute to and from an office.

With more employees working remotely from home, one can assume this would be a relief for employees who work at *burakku kigyō* companies. However, this change in work style has, in some cases, not affected these companies’ practices. When Japan declared a state of emergency in April of 2020, an employee of a house renovation company stated, “社長が『逆にチャンス。ガンガン営業しろ。在宅率が高いから今営業すれば世間から褒められる。周りは周り。気にするな』と話して皆を鼓舞している状況です” (“The manager said, ‘This is actually a good opportunity. Go all-out and keep doing business. Because the percentage

of people staying at home is so high, if we do business now, we'll be praised by the public. Don't worry about what everyone else is doing,' trying to encourage everyone"; Hayashi). It is evident that there are still managers trying to take advantage of their employees and have them work even harder and longer despite the changes to the work culture.

Conclusion

While there may be misconceptions about the Japanese work culture as a whole pertaining to the number of hours worked and the workplace environment in general for *sararīman*, they are not without reason. Japan's corporate culture has a long history of making employees work unreasonable hours, and with the existence of *burakku kigyō* businesses forcing their employees to work overtime without receiving compensation, it is easy for this type of treatment of employees to make people think this is the standard for all companies in Japan. While it is not 100% true that "Japan has longer work hours," it is still the reality for a lot of employees in certain industries. One must take the information they hear with a grain of salt initially and do proper research to find out if and why Japan might have longer work hours.

With the new norm of remote work, employees are finding themselves more productive and more satisfied with their work-life balance, and they are not spending an unnecessary number of hours in the office. That being said, Japan is still a collectivist society, and so the interests of the group are still more important than the interests of the individual. It is possible though that this new norm will cause a change for the better in Japan's corporate culture.

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