

Japan's efforts to reform work culture see results

Flexi-work, shorter hours among initiatives offered by govt and firms

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In Tokyo

Japan's largest advertising firm Dentsu will soon go to court over the Christmas Day 2015 suicide of a young employee who had been overworked and bullied.

The karoshi case is now a cause celebre epitomising the deep-rooted culture of workplace malpractice in Japan, while galvanising a fledgling movement to promote progressive practices at work.

Several companies have taken the lead in offering a four-day work week, with employees clocking the standard 40 hours a week over four 10-hour days instead of five eight-hour days.

Other arrangements to allow shorter work hours, tele-commuting and flexi-work are now more popular as companies strive to upkeep employee morale and prevent talent attrition, with the job market at its tightest in decades.

The government has also stepped up: It wants public servants to knock off on time on Wednesdays and Fridays, while the Premium Friday scheme urges firms to let their staff leave work at 3pm on the last Friday of the month.

Many firms have long been offering variants of the incentive, including Fast Retailing – parent company of fashion store Uniqlo – and tech firms Cybozu and SignalTalk.

IBM Japan has offered reduced hours since 2004. Employees may choose to work either 60 per cent

or 80 per cent of the standard 40-hour workweek, with their salaries pro-rated accordingly.

Company spokesman Kazuhiko Suyama said this was to support the career and skills development of prized employees. Dozens of staff have chosen to work shorter hours in order to tend to their children or elderly parents, while three people with disabilities are also on board the scheme.

Marketing company Willgate also offers reduced work hours, which manager Naoko Oikawa, 38, said ensured her career development need not be put on hold while she took care of her newborn son.

Software firm SignalTalk has various schemes including teleworking. Spokesman Mie Unno told The Straits Times the initiatives have

helped to retain talent, including someone who wanted to quit to take care of his elderly parents.

"At first there was concern the schemes will lead to a reduction in our business output," she said. "But it places trust in our professional employees, and they value the self-management system."

The government hopes to encourage a better work-life balance through Premium Friday, which also urges workers to loosen their purse strings to drive consumption.

Mr Riki Ohtake of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry that runs the programme told The Straits Times that early signs have been encouraging, and the initiative is not just a flash in the pan.

In the five campaigns since the February launch, the number of par-

ticipating firms has grown almost four times from 136 to 537, involving an estimated 710,000 employees. Although the firms include big names such as Nissan and Sumitomo Mitsui Banking Corp, most are small and medium-sized enterprises.

Department stores like Daimaru and Takashimaya have seen a spike in earnings on Premium Friday, and the number of retailers offering discounts or promotions has risen 60 per cent to nearly 7,500.

Mr Ohtake noted the operational difficulties expressed by some industries. But he said: "We would like to convey the philosophy behind Premium Friday so that such companies, too, can take up reasonable measures."

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Ms Naoko Oikawa, a manager with marketing company Willgate, worked reduced hours while she took care of her newborn child. ST PHOTO: WALTER SIM



Holding two jobs, Mr Ryuta Nakamura says, has not only let him earn more money but also pursue diverse interests and grow his networks in two different fields. ST PHOTO: WALTER SIM

IT developer and ginseng farmer – at the same time

For four days a week – from Tuesday to Friday – Mr Ryuta Nakamura joins the ranks of salaried employees and works as a software developer for IT company Cybozu.

The other three days of the week, he toils the fields in front of his home as a ginseng farmer for agricultural firm NK Agri Corporation.

Holding two jobs, Mr Nakamura, 53, told The Straits Times, has not

only let him earn more money but also pursue diverse interests.

"IT and agriculture are entirely different, and my two roles make for a very refreshing breath of fresh air," said Mr Nakamura, a father of two children aged 24 and 21.

Such a scheme was in the spotlight in Japan recently, when major delivery firm Sagawa Express began wooing potential employees

with a four-day work week amid a labour crunch, while also allowing them to take on a second job.

Mr Nakamura said the arrangement has allowed him to grow his networks in two very different industries, which may lead to cross-industry collaboration. But a downside is that he needed to manage the expectations of two different sets of bosses, he quipped.

Mr Nakamura, who used to work for tech conglomerates NEC and Microsoft, now also takes part in dialogue sessions with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe as Japan grapples with the bigger question of how to deal with issues like entrenched overtime.

Cybozu was launched in 1997, and has offered employees the freedom to choose how they work

since 2007 – an option which the company acknowledges is still "quite unusual" in Japan.

"Work-life balance may be the catchword, but there really does not need to be a cleavage between work and life," said Mr Nakamura. "So long as you enjoy what you do, it will not seem like work."

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A screenshot from a video taken by a robot underwater showing the lower part of a control rod drive inside reactor No. 3 at Fukushima. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE



Fukushima images likely to be of melted nuclear fuel

TOKYO • New images captured in the past few days show what is likely to be melted nuclear fuel from one of Japan's wrecked Fukushima reactors, a potential milestone in the cleanup of one of the worst atomic disasters in history.

Tokyo Electric Power Co (Tepeco), Japan's biggest utility, has released images of mounds of black rock and sand-like substances at the bottom of the No. 3 reactor containment vessel at Fukushima, which is likely to contain melted fuel, said Tepeco

official Takahiro Kimoto.

A survey had found black icicles hanging from above the pressure vessel, which was "highly likely" to contain melted fuel. Mr Kimoto noted it would take time to confirm if this debris contains melted fuel.

"The pictures that we have gained will assist us in devising a plan for removing the melted fuel," he said.

If confirmed, the pictures would be the first discovery of the fuel that melted during the triple-reactor accident at Fukushima six years ago.

Removing the fuel is one of the most important steps in a cleanup that may take as long as 40 years.

The pictures were taken by a Toshiba-designed, 30cm-long robot the firm sent to explore the inside of the reactor for the first time. The robot, which can swim in the flooded unit, was tasked with surveying the damage and finding the location of corium – a mixture of the atomic fuel rods and other structural materials that forms after a meltdown.

Due to the high radioactivity lev-

els inside the reactor, only specially designed robots can probe the unit. Tepeco is pinning its efforts on technology not yet invented to get the melted fuel out of the reactors.

"If some of these fragments can be brought out of the reactor and studied, it would allow nuclear engineers and scientists to better model what happened during the accident," said Professor M. V. Ramana of the Liu Institute for Global Issues at the University of British Columbia. BLOOMBERG

Pushing healthier work-life balance

NATIONWIDE

Premium Friday

Companies are urged to let their employees knock off at 3pm on the last Friday of each month, in a campaign that began in February. Hopefully, the early dismissal would also give workers time to go shopping and contribute to the economy.

So far, more than 530 firms nationwide are taking part.

No Overtime Day

The central government is attempting to take the lead by advising public servants to knock off on time on Wednesdays and Fridays, though this serves more as a guideline than a hard-and-fast rule.

Day of Telework

The Olympic Games will open in Tokyo on July 24, 2020, and the central government has earmarked this date as the Day of Telework in Japan. Only about 16 per cent of companies with more than 100 employees have introduced such a system.

IN TOKYO

Jisa Biz, which means time difference in Japanese, was recently launched to urge companies to implement measures such as flexi-time arrangements.

It also targets Tokyo's infamous overcrowded commuter trains during the morning rush hour, with an eye towards alleviating the situation by the 2020 Olympics. About 260 firms and municipalities are on board.

AT COMPANY LEVEL

More companies, such as Uniqlo and Sagawa Express, are embracing the four-day work week. Employees clock four 10-hour days instead of the standard five eight-hour days. They are also typically allowed to take up a second job.

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