

For many in Japan, remote work during coronavirus outbreak is not an option

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Commuting on packed trains and spending hours in a confined office space are akin to a nightmare in the age of the COVID-19 pandemic.

To protect employees from such high-risk environments, firms nationwide have been scrambling to enable them to work remotely. A survey conducted by the Osaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry earlier this month showed that 54.7 percent of large corporations with capital of ¥300 million or more in the prefecture are now implementing telework.

But remote work remains off-limits for many — in particular those engaged in occupations that by nature require their physical presence in the workplace, such as cooks, hairdressers, taxi drivers and doctors.

For office workers, reasons behind a lack of remote work uptake run the gamut from security concerns and reams of paperwork to peer pressure and a lack of the necessary digital infrastructure, highlighting the challenges ahead for domestic firms as more explore ways to introduce a flexible work style.

What's on the minds of those forced to endure crowded trains every day despite the growing threat of COVID-19? And what measures have their employers introduced to protect their health?

Many workers in Tokyo shared their stories with The Japan Times, some on condition of anonymity for fear of company reprisal.

Insurance firm employee

Although his company as a whole promotes telework, the employee, 57, said his position involves processing piles of paperwork signed by clients. Only a small portion of these documents are digitized, forcing him and co-workers in his division to toil over a mountain of paper in the office every day.

"Ideally, I want to work remotely. Commuting on a train in situations like this is very unpleasant — disgusting, even," he said. "Whenever there's somebody coughing near me on a train, it makes me want to punch the hell out of them."

But for all other departments in his company, where less paperwork is involved, a shift to telework has spread at an almost miraculous rate thanks to the coronavirus outbreak, he said.

Moreover, bottles of hand sanitizer are now ubiquitous in the office, commuting hours have been staggered and, to his slight disappointment, nomikai (drinking parties) with colleagues have been canceled at the request of management.

As far as his division goes, the unavailability of remote work has been compensated for by the announcement that employees there can take paid leave. But there's a catch.

"It's not that we are being afforded new paid vacation days — it's just that we've been encouraged to use our unused ones," he said. "So it's not like there's been a gift for us," he added with a sigh.

Employee of large company

An American in her 40s who has lived in Japan for more than 20 years says she is not surprised that her office remains as full as ever despite the pandemic, even though the company sent messages to employees saying that it will allow them to work from home if need be.

But even after the messages from the top, she said, it appears the vast majority of her colleagues have decided to work from the office.

She chalks it up to what she described as the "Japanese mentality of 'just show up,'" which she believes is unlikely to go away "unless someone in management makes an explicit announcement of 'work from home,' or sets an example of doing so."

Calling her firm — which develops confidential education content — a "big, very Japanese company," she said the idea that "you just show up and do the overtime" is an almost ingrained part of the corporate culture that pervades her office.

"And I'm pretty sure it's not just my company, given how full the Odakyu Line is," she said, referring to the railway line she uses to commute.

The woman is also working from the office because her division is where "security is the tightest" and employees there are discouraged from teleworking.

Although part of her accepts that policy, she said she wishes there was "more trust in their employees to not go and leak materials."

"So I can kind of understand. I can kind of not," she said.

Call center employee

A woman working at a call center is tasked with answering inquiries from her customers by looking up their registered personal information, including their addresses, birthdates and phone numbers.

Access to such highly confidential data from home is "inconceivable," the 53-year-old said, given the tight security at her company, which even bans employees from bringing their cellphones into the office.

But because the physical presence of workers is central to the operation of a call center, the company has gone out of its way to help protect their health, providing the team of more than 200 employees on her floor with new masks every day and obliging them to wear them while on duty.

"Our company was always extra careful about our well-being whenever a public health crisis like influenza occurred," she said. But, she added, "it was never as thorough as it is this time."

Additionally, she said, the company has provided disinfectant to clean keyboards, installed humidifiers and moved some meetings online. "I find those measures pretty sufficient, so I'm not that worried about getting sick in the office," she said.

Hairstylists

Hairstylist Takemi Yoshioka confesses to having anxiety over not being able to work remotely.

"Since beauty salons are supervised by public health centers, they have always been sensitive to hygiene management. But still, the fact that customers tend to stay for a long time in a relatively confined space, as well as the fact some of them travel from afar, do make me a little concerned" about the risk of infection at work, he said.

Koichi Nihei, another hairstylist, is more resigned to the nature of his work, which puts him and his colleagues in close proximity to countless customers all day.

"It's like how you might get into a car accident. If you catch the virus, then that's that," said Nihei, 47.

"I think ours is one of the occupations where being worried will get you nowhere," Nihei added. "There's just a constant ebb and flow of comings and goings in our workplace, so there is really no way of blocking the virus."

With Nihei's shop, Pia Hair Salon Tokyo in Shibuya, catering almost exclusively to non-Japanese clients, he says he and his staff go without masks, as the practice of wearing them — not as common overseas — could scare away patrons.

"Most of our customers say they are skeptical about the effectiveness of masks because the virus is said to be transmittable through the eyes, and that's what we think, too," Nihei said, adding employees at his salon are instead instructed to wash their hands and use hand sanitizer more rigorously than they did before as preventive measures.

Restaurant manager

Despite dealing with a slew of customers each day, Tomoyuki Endo, a 43-year-old restaurant manager in Shibuya, cites painstaking hand-washing as the only preventive measure his employees are instructed to observe, citing his parent company's policy of "not overreacting" to the outbreak.

"We've been told, for example, to never turn down foreign customers," Endo said.

"It's true that all sorts of people visit our place every day, but part of me is optimistic that the odds of me getting infected are really slim, so I'm not that worried," he said.

Endo said his biggest concern has less to do with the risk of infections than with the devastating toll the pandemic is taking on his business, which has seen a sharp decline in customers.

"I've been told that if this situation continues for another few months, our company may be in danger," he said. "I may have to cut back on the payroll of part-time workers."

Boutique employee

Such concern was echoed by Yuko Ono, who works at a boutique. Remote work is impossible for her because she is tasked with examining an array of merchandise firsthand.

"Our sense of crisis over the possibility of infections at work may not be as high as people might think," Ono said. "Instead, it's our livelihood — and the fact the economy is essentially grinding to a halt — that we're most worried about."

Physician

Although the nature of her job essentially prevents her from working remotely, Akina Haiden, an emergency physician at a Tokyo hospital, said close contact with patients infected with contagious diseases comes with the territory, noting she is more concerned with measles and tuberculosis than the new coronavirus.

"That being said, we always have a risk of being a carrier and infecting our patients. I think health care workers are more worried that we could potentially be the one infecting a compromised patient, resulting in death," she said.

Hospitals are by nature thorough about sanitation and anti-infection measures, but the coronavirus outbreak has prompted her workplace to take additional steps, such as isolating suspected patients in different rooms and limiting visits for in-patients to prevent hospital-acquired COVID-19 cases, she said.

Like many hospitals across the nation, hers isn't entirely immune to fallout from the crisis, either.

A severe dearth of hand sanitizer, Haiden said, is forcing her and her colleagues to constantly wash their hands where they would normally use alcohol, while the inundation of "panicked" patients with the most trivial symptoms — "like the one cough they had three days ago," as she put it — is causing the out-patient system "to fall apart."

"To the healthy general public, COVID-19 is no worse than the normal seasonal flu at the moment," she said. "Panic-shopping doesn't help, panic-clinic visits don't help, and stay at home if you feel unwell."

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