

## Work from home, they said. In Japan, it's not so easy.

By **Simon Denyer**

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TOKYO — When it comes to working from home, Japan simply doesn't get it.

In the midst of a coronavirus epidemic, with a state of emergency about to be imposed, commuter trains in Tokyo are still pretty packed, and many companies are acting like nothing has really changed.

This is a nation where you still have to show up in person.

Japan's work culture demands constant face-to-face interaction, partly to show respect. Employees typically are judged on the hours they put in, rather than their output. Managers don't trust their staff to work from home, and many companies are just not set up for telework.

"My boss said it loud and clear: 'If I allow you guys to go home, you might not be focusing on your work. Who knows? You might even be drinking,'" said one investment banker, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to be candid.

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Clients don't want face-to-face meetings anymore, the banker said, but his boss still thinks the team should be in the office to take their phone calls, just to show them respect.

"Otherwise, my boss says, it's just giving clients the idea that you're taking time off and making things easy for yourself," the banker said. "It's Japanese pride."

The uniquely rigid work culture has left this country among the least prepared in the developed world to embrace the remote-working realities of the coronavirus age.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe finally said he will declare a state of emergency on Tuesday to cover Tokyo, Osaka and other parts of the country most severely affected by the coronavirus. But he added, "We will not lock cities down as has been done overseas."

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His decision followed two weeks of surging infections in Tokyo and growing calls for much firmer government action.

Part of the reason Abe has been reluctant to act sooner and more decisively may be a realization of just how unprepared many businesses are for telework, said management consultant Rochelle Kopp.

Technology is an important factor. Despite the image of Japan as a high-tech nation, it simply is not set up for telework. Like the hare in the fable, it often feels like a country that raced headlong into the future and then in the early 1990s, when the asset price bubble burst, took a nap and let everyone else overtake it.

Japanese companies lag behind their Western counterparts in IT investment, and many are still stuck 20 years in the past, with old software and little awareness of cloud computing or video conferencing tools.

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IT departments are so paranoid about protecting intellectual property and

confidential client information that they allow employees to access work systems only on office computers.

Many employees do not even own laptops — partly because of the risk of losing them during after-work drinking sessions — and many don't have WiFi at home. Even if they did, many — especially in Tokyo — would be forced to work on the dining room table in a cramped apartment.

This is a country where businesses still send faxes, and where documents have to be stamped with a seal, or hanko, dipped in ink. Even people working from home have to go into the office to get documents stamped by a manager, according to local media.

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Schools have closed, but they have little or no provision for online learning.

Despite the neon lights and bullet trains, Japan's broader corporate culture also seems stuck in the past, with widespread discrimination against women and power

mostly in the hands of conservative, elderly men.

That culture might explain why, according to media reports, one salaryman has to wear a shirt, tie and office lanyard while working at his kitchen table or why one woman had to defy the government's request to stay home last weekend because she needed a new suit — to wear while working at home.

Meanwhile, the government repeatedly summons journalists to reinforce its anti-virus message — that people should avoid crowded, poorly ventilated spaces where strangers converse for extended periods — at news conferences that clearly violate all those conditions.

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Despite repeated entreaties, journalists have been told, the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare “has no plans to live-stream this news conference.”

Japanese work culture is based on a concept known as *ho-ren-sou*, an acronym for report-inform-consult. Rather than being given discrete tasks and the autonomy to execute them, subordinates are expected to consult with managers every step of the way.

That is harder when they are not in the same location.

Job descriptions tend to be vague, and there is a premium on teamwork over individuality. That is one reason employees tend to be judged on the hours they put in — it is tougher to evaluate what they produce when everything is a collaboration.

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Some of these differences are not necessarily any worse than Western ways of working. But Kopp, who advises Western and Japanese companies on how to bridge the cultural divide, said many are long-standing problems that the coronavirus — and the demand to work from home — have exposed: “It looks like when the tide goes out — and leaves all the junk on the beach.”

If a lockdown comes, she said, some companies are ready, and some will adapt. But others could simply close down operations, she said, with employers forcing staff to take vacations or unpaid leave.

Until then, though, many are simply behaving as if nothing has changed.

“My boss went for drinks with my colleagues twice last week,” the banker said. “He likes drinking a lot; he likes to take out others and talk about work. I don’t have any issue with that. But my point is, if you’re going to tell me, ‘Do this, do that,’ and be strict on certain things, then why don’t you be strict on yourself?”