

ISSUES

Achieving New Work Styles that Suit People and Workplaces

Evolving Solutions for Work Style Reform

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Japan has begun to review its approach to work in the face of societal problems, including long working hours and a shrinking workforce, that are happening against the background of a rapidly aging population and very low birthrate. As Hitachi accelerates the pace of globalization within its businesses, it is putting a lot of effort into talent resources utilization and into reforming its working practices, pursuing its own work style reforms that make use of advanced digital technologies such as the IoT and AI. It is also supplying a variety of solutions to help customers increase intellectual productivity and achieve flexible work styles that suit their workplaces. Although it has made some progress, the introduction of work style reform can still be stymied by factors such as existing practices and culture. If new ways of working are to be developed, what approach should be taken to the challenges and what is the best way to go about reform? To talk about the challenges and prospects for work style reform, Hitachi has invited Yuri Tazawa, the president of Telework Management Inc., who has been a pioneer in the field as both a leader and promoter of work style reform and who has pushed the adoption of telework in Japan.

Promote Telework with Personal Experience as a Starting Point

Go: There is growing interest among companies about work style reform, including telework. Tazawa-san, you have been a leader in this trend, among the first to get involved in the practice and promotion of telework. What was it that prompted you to enter this field?

Tazawa: My involvement in this field arose out of my own experience of having to quit my job to look after children and because of my husband's job relocation. When I started working it

was still common for women to leave their jobs when they got married or had children and I was disappointed at not being able to continue doing work that I enjoyed. That led to my establishing Y's Staff Corporation in 1998, a company that undertook IT-related work using a team-based structure with staff working from home located around the country, the idea being to make it possible for people with high levels of skills and knowledge that they have developed through their work to put these to use while still remaining at home. Although the company grew steadily, I decided after 10 years that changing society was going to require a larger organization. That led to my setting up Telework Management Inc. in 2008 to assist with the implementation of telework at companies and government agencies.

Go: How many people work at Telework Management?

Tazawa: Although we have 13 staff members, only about two people regularly go to work at our Tokyo office. For myself, I am based in Kitami City in Hokkaido, and we also have administration

and technology staff members at our Kitami office. The telephone number on my business card connects to Kitami as well as to Tokyo, with Kitami staff normally taking phone calls and transferring them to staff working from home in Tokyo or outside of the office. We can make effective use of staff and get a lot of work done efficiently without having to maintain a large office in Tokyo where rents are high. Including small projects, we have undertaken consulting work for around 200 different companies to date.

Go: That makes you a model for telework. Along with your commercial work, you have also collaborated with central and local government on promoting telework, including by serving as a policy commentator to the cabinet and as a member of the Taskforce to Promote Regional IoT Implementation at the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC). Are there any particular insights that come from living outside the major cities?

Tazawa: Yes. Although I was born in Nara Prefecture, I became very fond of Hokkaido after going there with my husband who moves around a lot for his work. We decided to move there permanently out of a desire to raise our three daughters amid its natural environment. I now appreciate what is so wonderful about living outside the city. On the other hand, the loss of population in the provinces is worsening due to the movement of people to the cities. Telework represents one solution to this problem. This is because, even without attracting employers to the regions, people can still work there via telework, making what we call a “U-turn” (meaning someone moving back from the city to their rural home) or an “I-turn” in Japan (meaning a city-born person moving to a rural location). This thinking of mine was incorporated into the regional revitalization policies being pursued by the government and led to the



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Yuri Tazawa

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Graduated with a degree in Spanish from the Faculty of Foreign Studies at Sophia University in 1985. She joined Sharp Corporation where she worked on PC product planning. After leaving Sharp to have children and because of her husband being relocated, she continued to work as a freelance writer in the PC sector. She started Y's Staff Corporation in Kitami City, Hokkaido in 1998. The company has taken on a variety of work and has a team structure with 120 staff (contractors) located around Japan. She established Telework Management Inc. in 2008 with the aim of encouraging wider adoption of flexible working practices. The company has an office in Tokyo and has been involved in a wide variety of work that includes helping corporate and other customers to establish teleworking and encouraging the use of telework in national and local government. She is CEO of Y's Staff Corporation, a policy commentator to the Cabinet Office, and an advisor to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications on regional IT use.

Furusato Telework project of the MIC that was launched in 2015.

Creating Companies that Can Work and Communicate Everywhere

Momoki: What are the most common objectives for companies adopting telework?

Tazawa: The main objective is to attract a better quality of staff by creating a good working environment. Growing interest in telework arose out of the second Abe government formed in 2013, which encouraged the policy of telework, and continued to grow out of work style reform being designated a leading objective of the government in 2016. However, the impetus behind those is the major change in society due to workforce shortages resulting from an aging population and low birthrate. I get the sense that companies are being motivated by their fears of increased competition for staff in the future.

Momoki: Hitachi has been taking steps toward work style reform and greater use of telework. What aspects do you see as being important to the successful introduction of telework?

Tazawa: Many people tend to think that telework requires the division or organization of work in advance and the delivery of work to individual workers in remote offices. The problem with this

is the time and effort it requires, and the arbitrary division of work like this is bad for productivity. The first thing people need to do is get rid of this preconception and make changes to their processes, procedures, tools, and attitudes that will allow them to keep doing their existing work wherever they are. Getting work properly organized should also make it more efficient. This difference in perspective between changing people's existing work to suit teleworking versus changing how they do their existing work to suit teleworking is a key point.

Go: I expect that it is time to change the nature of work, and it might be time to change the management attitude.

Tazawa: It is true that women caring for children are very busy. Dividing up work to share to support them might be a possible interim measure. But it is not a durable measure, obviously. Men at the peak of their careers having to stop working to care for elderly people is expected to become a growing problem in the future. To address these issues, senior management need to change their attitudes and reform their companies to enable staff to work and communicate from anywhere.

While people may tend to see difficulties in trying to do the same work remotely that they have been doing at the office, Hitachi has numerous solutions for making this possible. The ways

to overcome the problems of teleworking are to use information and communication technology (ICT) as a tool and to take advantage of consulting on how best to use it. My hope is that, through Hitachi's ICT solutions and the knowledge we have built up, more companies will come to appreciate the benefits of telework.

Japanese Style Telework that Emphasizes Unity

Go: Using the telephone for communication is routine at American companies, and people can work well with people they have never met in person. In Japan, however, there are high psychological barriers to this approach.

Tazawa: That's right. That is because in Japan we place a high importance on meeting face-to-face. Moreover, when put against American individualism, Japan's collegial approach and ability to perform as a team are seen as strengths. Rather than disavowing this, what I believe we should do is seek to develop a Japanese style of telework that allows people to work as a team even when physically separated.

Momoki: Your publication talks about an environment in which it feels like people are at the desk next to you. It is possible to utilize ICT to create places in cyberspace where groups of people can talk face-to-face and share information just like they do in morning or evening meetings in the physical world.

Tazawa: Even though our staff are scattered about in different places, we use the cloud to greet each other in the office every morning and to hold meetings or share information. Being able to communicate as if we were in the same office prevents loneliness and avoids situations in which work is held up or people feel they cannot approach each other because of the separation. Another benefit

is that the lack of any need to travel allows us to make effective use of time.

Go: With the advances in portable devices and other tools, I hope we can work on a Japanese-style telework solution that maintains a collegial sense of unity.

Tazawa: Time management is another important aspect of telework. In February 2018, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare issued guidelines on the appropriate introduction and implementation of out-of-office working practices using ICT. These guidelines included working time management practices to prevent the use of telework from resulting in long working hours. This seems like another aspect that is specific to Japan, and it indicates the growing importance of management as the corporate adoption of flexible working practices spreads.

Momoki: Hitachi launched a company-wide program of work style reforms in December 2016 led by President Higashihara and called Hitachi Work-Life Innovation. The program covers initiatives for changing attitudes, promoting flexible working practices that are not dependent on time or place, and operational reforms. It also includes the global standardization of ICT tools, an area where in the past there has been little consistency between different workplaces and departments in Japan and overseas, but now with progress being made on achieving smoother and faster communications. This is also making it easier to collect different types of data relating to work, facilitating the reporting and analysis of working hours. Not only does this provide management with information about what hours are being worked, as you noted, it is also seen as a way to boost intellectual productivity by allowing individuals to use data as a basis for reviewing their own time allocation and other working practices.

Supplying Solutions for Work Style Reform as “One Hitachi”

Tazawa: Higher intellectual productivity is certainly one of the benefits expected from telework and work style reform. Apart from those things you have already mentioned, what is being done to achieve this?

Momoki: One is to make use of the time that is freed up by doing less low-priority travel. Likewise, visualizing the content of work and time spent allows people to identify which work they should be doing and which they shouldn't. The aim is to create an environment in which staff can focus on the work they are meant to be doing, thereby improving productivity, by using robotic process automation (RPA) as an alternative to people for administrative procedures and other routine work, or by using artificial intelligence (AI) to support more complex tasks.

Go: I believe that improving people's work satisfaction also increases productivity. Hitachi has a solution for surveying levels of employee satisfaction, and we have found by utilizing it within the company that satisfaction is slowly improving. Our goal is not just to reduce overtime hours, but rather to enable people to grow by utilizing the time freed up to take on new challenges, learn new things, or to refresh. As we believe that personal growth leads to company growth, and that a happy workforce energizes the company, we intend to focus on monitoring and management aimed at achieving this.

Tazawa: The ability to visualize psychological changes such as satisfaction is very important also for considering which policies to pursue. I understand that Hitachi set up a department called Work Life Integration Solution Development in April of this year. Can you tell me what you aim to achieve by this?

Go: Hitachi is made up of a wide variety of companies and we supply a diverse range of systems and solutions associated with work style reform, including the use of the Internet of Things (IoT) to visualize things like people's movements or the operational condition of equipment, AI assistants, support for health management, speech analysis, office fit out, and assistance with adopting paperless procedures. Unfortunately, customers embarking on work style reforms are sometimes unsure which part of Hitachi to consult. Accordingly, one of the aims is to establish an organization that can supply work style reform solutions as “One Hitachi,” providing a one-stop point of contact for customers as well as combining different technologies based on the customer's requirements and supplying them with consideration for appropriate introduction priority. Another objective is to build up expertise from the work style reforms being undertaken for the approximately 300,000 people who work for Hitachi, collate it into use cases, and use it to help deliver solutions to customers.

Tazawa: When I think back to myself 20 years ago, I am delighted by the thought that a large corporation like Hitachi that operates a variety of businesses around the world and drives the economy should establish such a division and take serious steps toward work style reform. I look forward to seeing you transform working practices in Japan through your own reforms and through the supply of solutions.

Go: You have been very informative today. With you as our model, we will work actively to bring about reform.

Momoki: I hope Hitachi can help achieve new and flexible working practices that take advantage of Japan's strengths. Thank you very much.