Original Paper

Current Status of Occupational Mental Health in Japan: A Comparison of the Administrative Guidelines Published in 2000 and 2006

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Abstract *A country's working styles are based on its respective culture. Until the beginning of the 1990s, the Japanese economy was showing robust development. Stable employment was enjoyed by the majority of the population, and employees enjoyed a high level of life-style satisfaction. Lifetime employment and the seniority system were regarded as the secrets of the strong growth within the Japanese economy.*
However, in recent years, Japanese employees have been under a significant amount of physical and mental stress. Sleep deprivation caused by extended working hours is common, and the number of people suffering from work-related stress has been increasing annually. Concurrently, the suicide rate of company employees has also risen considerably. As a result, karo-jisatsu (suicide from overwork) has become an object of public concern.
The increase of stressful working conditions in Japan occurred as follows. Soon after the economic bubble burst in the early 1990s, drastic changes in working conditions took place. There was a noticeable decline in the number of people in lifetime employment and the seniority system began to be replaced by the introduction of a meritocratic system. Information technology began to be introduced into the workplace. Restructuring, down-sizing and lay-offs also took place in most Japanese companies, resulting in an increasing workload for each individual employee.
In order to improve working conditions and promote employee mental health, administrative guidelines for occupational mental health were issued by the Ministry of Labour in 2000 and 2006. At present, these two mental health guidelines do not appear to have been particularly effective in reducing working hours or the suicide rate. Therefore, to definitively assess the effects of these guidelines, long-term observation is necessary.
Japan is currently in a transitional period regarding improvement to the workplace environment. Thus, it is an ideal time to construct a working culture based on the positive aspects of the traditional Japanese working style, such as cooperation among employees, health care staff, and employers. As in any culture, a new working culture that incorporated the old would be more readily accepted.

Keywords: Occupational mental health, mental health guidelines

WCPRR Jan 2009: 53-59 © 2009 WACP

INTRODUCTION Working styles, working environment and work life balance are based on the culture of the respective country. Japanese employees are notorious, for their long working hours. In 1990, I was asked an interesting question by a young Italian. He wanted to know why Japanese employees work overtime, even though there is no risk of dismissal. At that time, the lifetime employment system was standard in Japan. Within this context, the question was understandable, however as no Japanese employee, including myself, worked extra hours for the purpose of safeguarding their employment, it was a surprising question to me, as a Japanese. Upon consideration, I explained to him that, at that time, Japanese workers tended to regard their company as their family. Therefore, they helped one another, just as they did in their family and accepted long working hours as familial duty. However, I do not know if that answer was comprehensible to someone unfamiliar with the Japanese work attitude.

In the 18 years that have passed since then, the Japanese working environment has undergone significant changes. The lifetime employment and seniority system, which were characteristic of the Japanese working system, are no longer employed. There are arguments to be made both ways

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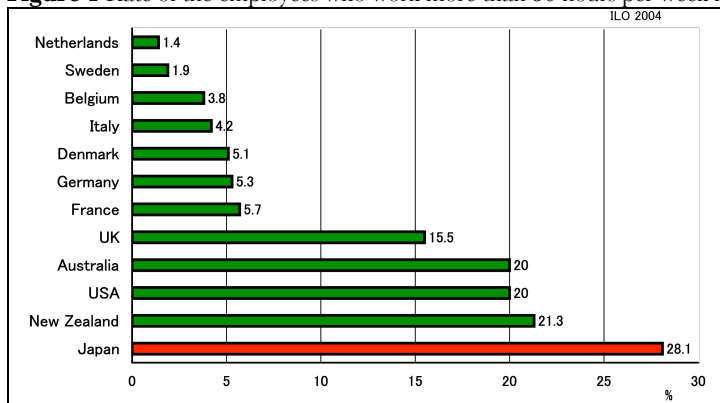6-21-1, Nagao, Tama-ku, Kawasaki-shi, Kanagawa 214-8585 Japan

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regarding whether this change was positive or negative, but one thing is clear: the changes have increased the amount of stress felt by Japanese employees, who continue to work very long hours.

In this article, I will begin by introducing the figures that quantitatively describe the stressful working situation in Japan. I will then explain the governmental guidelines for occupational mental health.

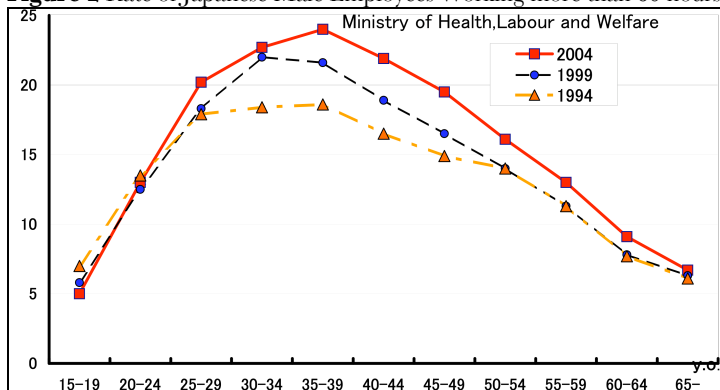# THE CURRENT WORKING SITUATION IN JAPAN

Long working hours and overtime

Figure 1 shows the ratio of employees in various developed countries who were working more than 50 hours per week in 2000 (ILO, 2004). As the legal limit for working hours was 40 per week in most of these countries at the time, it can be seen that these employees worked 10 or more extra hours per week. Very few employees in the Netherlands and Sweden and around 5% of the employees in other European countries in this figure worked overtime. In the English-speaking countries, the UK, Australia, the USA, and New Zealand, approximately 15% to 20% of people were working overtime. In contrast, nearly 30% of Japanese employees were working over 50 hours per week at the time of this survey.

Figure 1 Rate of the employees who work more than 50 hours per week in 2000

The ratio of Japanese male employees in different age groups working more than 60 hours per week, that is more than 20 hours of weekly overtime in 1994, 1999, and 2004, is shown in Figure 2 (Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare, 2006). Male employees in their thirties were consistently working longer hours than other age groups. It can also be seen that, in the main, the ratio of male employees across the age groups working overtime was increasing year by year.
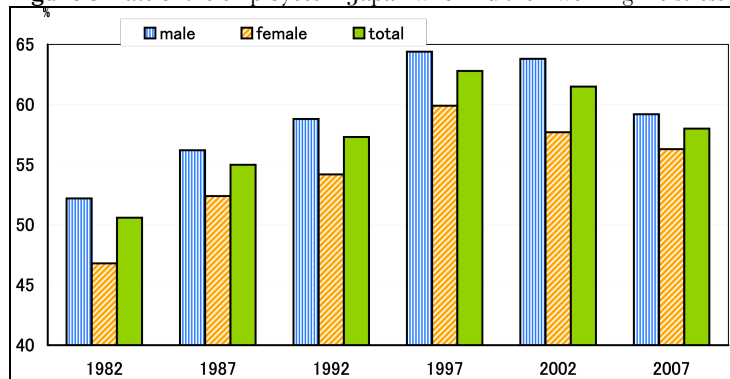
Figure 2 Rate of Japanese Male Employees Working more than 60 hours per week

Stress and mental disorders in the workplace

Every five years, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare surveys Japanese employee health issues, including mental health, using questionnaires. The number of employees reportedly suffering from work-related stress was 58% in 2007, and 62% in 2002, slightly below 1997 levels. Until 1997, reported levels of work-related stress had been increasing annually (Figure 3; Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2008a).

Figure 3 Rate of the employees in Japan who find their working life stressful

According to a survey by the Japan Productivity Center for Socio-Economic Development, 61.5% of the listed stock companies in Japan reported that the number of employees suffering from mental disorders was increasing: 48.9% in 2002, 58.2% in 2004, and 61.5% in 2006. In most companies, employees in their thirties were most frequently reported to suffer from mental disorders (Japan Productivity Center for Socio-Economic Development, 2006).

Suicide rate

Figure 4 shows that from 1998, the total number of suicides suddenly increased in Japan (National Police Agency, 2008). From 1998 to 2007, the suicide rate per million of the total Japanese population has remained around 25 until now. Compared with women, the number of suicides among men showed a remarkable increased, particularly for men in their forties, fifties and sixties. An increase in the suicide rate of employees, including managers, was seen across all vocations. *Karo-jisatsu* (suicide from overwork) has become an object of public concern. Some overworking employees suffered from depression, a potential cause of suicide.

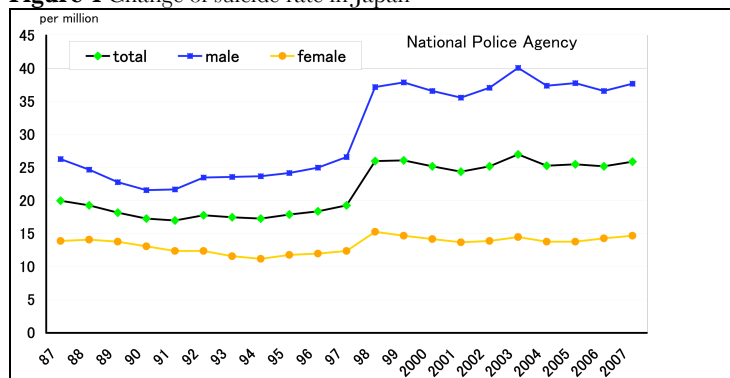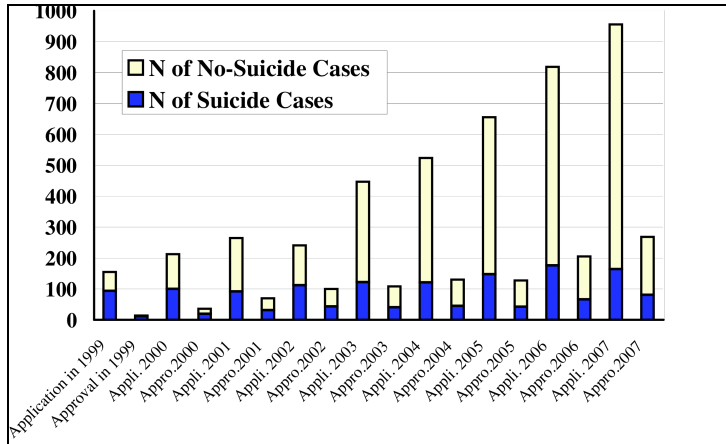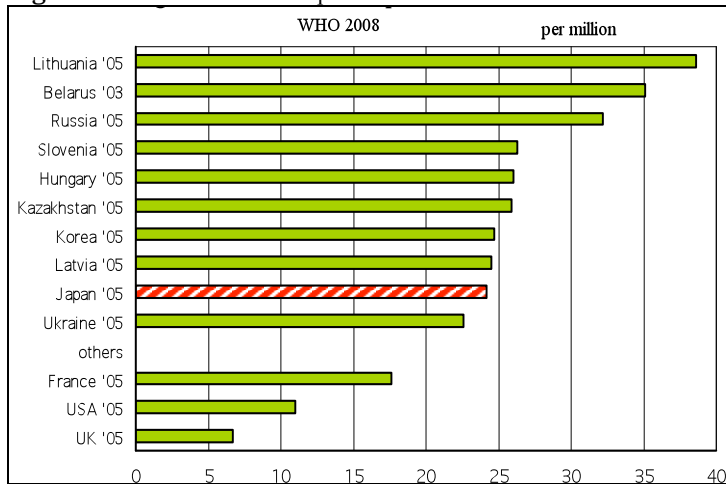**Figure 4** Change of suicide rate in Japan

Figure 5 below (Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare, 2008b) shows the remarkable increase in both number of applications and consequent approval for 'Compensation for Industrial Accidents Concerning Mental Disorders Including Suicide' in Japan in recent years.

Figure 5 Application and Approval of Compensation for Industrial Accidents Concerning Mental Disorders Including Suicide

Before 1998, the suicide rate in Japan was not high in comparison with other countries. However, Figure 6 shows that by 2005, the suicide rate in Japan ranked 9th highest in the world, following some Eastern European countries and Republic of Korea (WHO, 2008).

Figure 6 International Comparison of suicide rates

BACKGROUND TO THE STRESSFUL WORKING CONDITIONS IN JAPAN
Soon after the major business recession in the early 1990s, working conditions in Japan underwent striking changes. As international and domestic competition became fiercer, there was a significant increase in the number of mergers and acquisitions (M&A) and American working condition standards were successively introduced into Japanese companies (Shima, 2007).

Increase of individual employee workload
During the recession, most Japanese companies restructured, down-sized and many lay-offs took place. However, instead of hiring plenty of full-time employees once business began to recover, companies began recruiting part-timers and dispatch-employees. Simple tasks began to be

outsourced. Thus, the workload of each full-time employee became heavier, both in terms of quantity and complexity.

Changes in working environment
The major changes in the Japanese working environment were as follows:

1. *Decline of the lifetime employment and seniority system*
   Lifetime employment and the seniority system were traditional characteristics of the Japanese employment system. Although these secure, family-like systems were once thought to be the secrets of the strong growth of the Japanese economy, they became increasingly less common.
2. *Change in the personnel evaluation system: introduction of a meritocratic system*
   For the high-performing minority, this new meritocratic system endowed an advantage over other employees. For the majority of employees, the workplace atmosphere became more competitive and stressful. Employees tended to keep their results secret from their colleagues, which was detrimental to company development. In this way, the meritocratic system unfortunately may bring very few benefits to Japanese companies.
3. *Rearrangement of company organization from the traditional, vertical-type to a horizontal-type*
   Hiro (2007) pointed out that horizontal-type organization such as a project-oriented system, of which project leader has no responsibility about personnel things, often results in no manager to oversee and coordinate the workload of each employee.
4. *Introduction of a system allocating working hours at the discretion of each employee*
   Despite the intention of this system to allow employees to work only the hours necessary to complete their tasks, an employee with limited self-control is at risk of unintentionally working more overtime under this system.
5. *Introduction of information technology into offices*
   Older employees have difficulty using this new technology efficiently, while younger employees tend to send e-mails even to colleagues sitting in front of them, in order to avoid face-to-face communication.

Under these conditions, employees may suffer from considerable stress, potentially resulting in a significant increase in the suicide rate.

TWO ADMINISTRATIVE MENTAL HEALTH GUIDELINES FOR EMPLOYEES IN JAPAN
The increase in employees suffering from work-related stress and committing suicide, as mentioned previously, provided the impetus for these guidelines.

MENTAL HEALTH GUIDELINE, 2000

The enactment of the Mental Health Guideline, 2000
The first administrative guidelines for occupational mental health were issued by the Ministry of Labour in 2000 to improve working conditions and to promote employee mental health.
This was the first governmental publication of mental health guidelines for employees in Japan. In 1999, the year prior to the enactment of these guidelines, a guideline for compensation for labor accidents for mental disorders was also established.

'Four precautions' in the 2000 mental health guidelines

The 2000 guidelines contain four types of precautions to be taken to protect employee mental health.

a) Precautions taken by the individual employee to take notice of individual stressors and stress reactions.

b) Precautions taken by superiors to improve the working environment and care for each subordinate.

c) Precautions taken by occupational health staff within the company to provide professional health care by industrial physicians and occupational health nurses.

d) Precautions taken through resources outside of the workplace. This type of care is offered by clinics, hospitals and regional occupational health centers. Some companies utilize Employees Assistance Programs (EAP).

These four types of precautions are well thought out, but they are not specific enough to allow employers to understand what they should do in concrete terms to promote the mental health of their employees.

NEW MENTAL HEALTH GUIDELINES, 2006

The enactment of the new Mental Health Guidelines, 2006

New administrative guidelines were issued in 2006, based on the Occupational Safety and Health Law.

The new guidelines are very similar to the 2000 version, but are more practical. It is recommended that a mental health promoter be nominated among health care staff in each company. There also is a requirement for an occupational health committee that includes this promoter to be established in order to devise a mental health plan for employees, to put this plan into practice, and to assess its efficacy.

Promoting employee mental health under the 2006 guidelines

a) As a first precaution taken in order to promote employees' mental health, mental health training should be provided for each employee and manager.

b) As a second precaution, early notice should be taken of an employee's mental condition, as with physical condition. In order to accomplish this, closer cooperation with the employee's family is important. An employee whose overtime exceeds 100 hours per month must see an occupational physician to help prevent mental and physical disorders.

c) The third precaution requires a support system for employees on their return to work after sick leave.

The 2006 guidelines recommended close cooperation among three groups: health care staff inside a company, health care staff outside a company, and the employee's family. Cooperation among the people concerned is one of the most important factors in promoting mental health.

FUTURE PROBLEMS
Judging from the present situation, the two guidelines for mental health are not very effective in terms of reducing either working hours or the suicide rate. Japanese employees are still working long hours. The suicide rate still remained at more than 25 people per million in 2007. However, to examine the full effects of these guidelines, long term observation is necessary. It is clear that in addition to governmental guidelines, effort is needed on the part of employers.

The bankruptcy of large American stock companies in autumn 2008 showed that world business conditions may also become more unstable, having a potential ameliorative effect on the already unstable business situation in Japan. Business recession has had a significant effect on working styles, and working culture in Japan. Working conditions in Japan are now in a transitional period. The

once deep-rooted lifetime employment and seniority systems have mostly been discontinued and could are unlikely to be brought back; however, the newly introduced meritocratic system is now under reconsideration in many companies. Simply importing a foreign working system is not effective; therefore, I think it is an ideal time to reconstruct the working culture based on traditional Japanese systems, such as cooperation among employees, health care staff, and employers. As in any culture, a new working culture that is partly integrated with the old culture would be more readily accepted.

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