

Japan calls time on long-hours work culture

Level 3 • Advanced

1 Warmer

How many public holidays are there in your home country? And in the country where you work?
Do you get any paid holiday in your job? If so, how many days?

2 Key words

Write the key words next to the definitions below. Then, find them in the article to read them in context.

beatify	disloyalty	be entitled	height	inalienable	ingrained
nap	ostracized	punishing	quota	succumb	unforgiving

- behaviour that seems not supportive to an organization that you belong to _____
- used to describe an attitude, belief or habit has existed for a long time and cannot easily be changed

- have the right _____
- an amount of something that someone is officially allowed to have _____
- used to describe a right that cannot be taken away from you or given to someone else

- the time when something is at its best or strongest _____
- a short sleep, usually during the day _____
- not allowing you to make mistakes _____
- to become very ill or die _____
- no longer accepted as a member of a group _____
- extremely difficult, tiring or damaging _____
- to declare that something or someone is especially good or holy _____

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Clocking off: Japan calls time on long-hours work culture

As stress levels and karoshi – death through overwork – increase, the Japanese government is planning a law to force workers to take paid holiday

Justin McCurry in Tokyo

22 February, 2015

- 1 The regulation eight hours in the office is over. The most important work of the day is done; whatever is left can wait until the morning. This is the point many workers would think about heading for the door.
- 2 Yet, for millions of Japanese employees, the thought of clearing away their desks and being at home in time for dinner is enough to invite accusations of disloyalty.
- 3 But, after decades of giving companies carte blanche to milk every last drop of productivity from their workforce, a challenge to Japan's ingrained culture of overwork has come from the government, which is considering making it a legal requirement for workers to take at least five days' paid holiday a year.
- 4 Japanese employees are currently entitled to an average 18.5 days' paid holiday a year – only two fewer than the global average – with a minimum of ten days, as well as 15 one-day national holidays. In reality, few come even close to taking their full quota, typically using only nine of their 18.5-day average entitlement, according to the labour ministry. While many British workers regard a two-week summer holiday as an inalienable right, workers in Japan have come to see a four-night vacation in Hawaii as the height of self-indulgence.
- 5 The move, to be debated in the current parliamentary session, comes after companies started encouraging employees to nap on the job to improve their performance.
- 6 By the end of the decade, the government hopes that, if passed, the law will push Japanese employees towards following the example set by British workers, who use an average of 20 days' paid annual leave, and those in France, who take an average of 25.
- 7 Japan's unforgiving work culture may have helped turn it into an economic superpower, its corporate foot soldiers revered in the rest of the world for their commitment to the company, but this has often been to the exclusion of everything else.
- 8 Japan's low birth rate and predictions of rapid population decline are partly blamed on the lack of time couples have to start families. More employees are falling ill from stress, or worse, succumbing to *karoshi*, death through overwork.
- 9 Despite studies suggesting that longer hours in the office or workshop or on the factory floor do not necessarily make people more productive, today's workers are still nursing a collective hangover from the bubble years of the 1980s.
- 10 About 22% of Japanese work more than 49 hours a week, compared with 16% of US workers and 11% in France and Germany, according to data compiled by the Japanese government. At 35%, South Korea's workaholics are even worse off.
- 11 In spending 14 hours a day at work and giving up many of her paid holidays, Erika Sekiguchi is not even an extreme example. The 36-year-old trading company employee used eight of her 20 days of paid vacation in 2014, six of which counted as sick leave. "Nobody else uses their vacation days," Sekiguchi said.
- 12 She faces the dilemma shared by her peers in companies across Japan: never to take time off to recharge or to risk inviting criticism for appearing to leave more committed colleagues in the lurch.
- 13 Yuu Wakebe, a health ministry official overseeing policy on working hours, who admits putting in 100 hours of overtime a month, blames the irresistible pressure to match one's colleagues, hour for hour. "It is a worker's right to take paid vacations," Wakebe said. "But working in Japan involves quite a lot of volunteer spirit."
- 14 That fear of being ostracized at work is being blamed for a rise in stress-related illness, premature death and suicide. According to official data, about 200 people die every year from heart attacks, strokes and other *karoshi* events brought on by punishing work schedules.
- 15 The prime minister, Shinzo Abe, is not known for taking long vacations. Yet even he has spoken out against the unreasonable demands companies place on their employees as they

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struggle to stay afloat in a more complex globalized market. Japan's working culture, Abe said recently, "falsely beatifies long hours".

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3 Comprehension check

What can you remember from the article about working life in Japan?

1. What might people say about someone who finishes work in time to get home for dinner every evening?
2. What are the government considering doing in order to stop people from overworking?
3. On average, how many days' holiday do employees take a year?
4. How is overwork affecting population numbers?
5. What percentage of people work more than 49 hours a week?
6. What health repercussions do employees suffer from?
7. What sort of an example are politicians setting?

4 Key expressions

Find expressions in the article that have these meanings.

1. the freedom to do what you want in a particular situation (two words, para 3)
2. people with junior positions in a large company, whose job it is to do necessary but boring work (three words, para 7)
3. When you do something in this way, you only do that one thing and not the other things. (four words, para 7)
4. recovering something from the past such as an idea or attitude that is no longer suitable today (four words, para 9)
5. a time in Japan, from 1986 to 1991, when the economy was at a high point (two words, para 9)
6. in a difficult situation without help (three words, para 12)
7. an attitude to life in which people work for no money (two words, para 13)
8. remain in business despite a difficult situation (two words, para 15)

5 Work expressions

Explain what the expressions mean. Then, find them in the article to see how they are used. Write four new sentences, each one containing one of the expressions.

1. clock off
2. call time (on something)
3. head for the door
4. clear away your desk

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6 Discussion

- Read the quote from the article. Do you agree with the first part? Is volunteer spirit expected in your job?

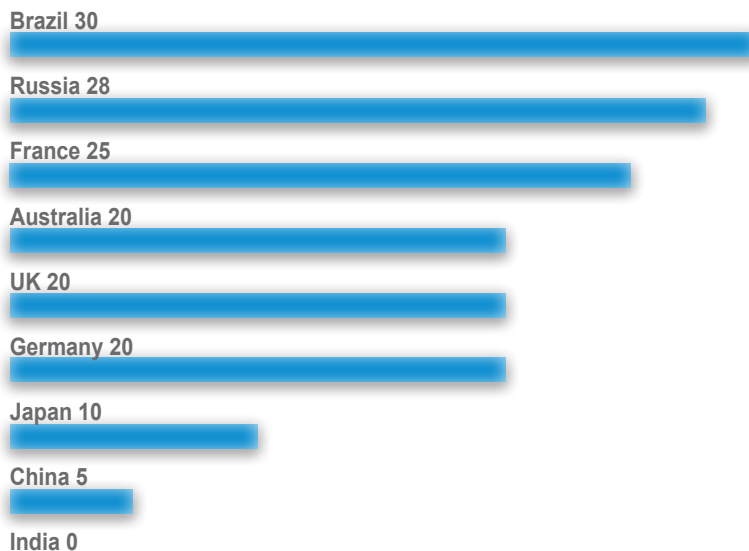
It is a worker's right to take paid vacations. But working in Japan involves quite a lot of volunteer spirit.

Yuu Wakebe, Japan health ministry

- Look at the graphic. Is your home country, or the country where you work, represented? If not, carry out any web research necessary to find the correct figures and, then, add the country to the graphic.

Paid annual leave How it compares

Minimum entitlement based on a five-day week



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KEY

2 Key words

1. disloyalty
2. ingrained
3. be entitled
4. quota
5. inalienable
6. height
7. nap
8. unforgiving
9. succumb
10. ostracized
11. punishing
12. beatify

5 Work expressions

1. to leave work
2. to decide it is time to end something
3. to be in the process of leaving a place
4. to finish your work for the day and prepare to leave

3 Comprehension check

1. that they are disloyal
2. making it a legal requirement that workers take at least five days' paid holiday a year
3. nine
4. Couples don't have time to start a family so the birth rate is low and the population is in decline.
5. about 22%
6. They are falling ill from stress, dying early and even committing suicide.
7. Not a very good one as they also do a lot of overtime and do not take long holidays.

4 Key expressions

1. carte blanche
2. corporate foot soldiers
3. to the exclusion of
4. nursing a collective hangover
5. bubble years
6. in the lurch
7. volunteer spirit
8. stay afloat