

Hanko

Amid coronavirus, Japan pledges to shift away from 'hanko' (NHK article)

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NHK World-Japan

**Amid coronavirus, Japan pledges to shift away from "hanko"**

Sakurai Reiko

NHK Senior Economic Commentator / NHK World Special Affairs Commentator

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# Backstories



Japanese government officials and business leaders have adopted a joint declaration that vows to significantly reduce paperwork and the use of "hanko", the traditional seals widely acknowledged as proof of agreement. The measure aims to help people stay at home amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Hanko is ubiquitous in Japanese society, used in at least 10,000 government processes, including driver's license applications and tax returns. Its use is mandated

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by law in some of these cases, and even when there is no legal obligation, the practice is so ingrained that it is often a de facto requirement.

Despite the widespread implementation of work-from-home measures amid the coronavirus pandemic, the use of hanko has persisted, with many people saying they still have to go into the office to stamp seals on documents.

The government has responded by vowing to proceed with reforms by the end of the year, and major businesses are also implementing their own efforts. Beverage giant Suntory and e-commerce company Mercari are among the firms that have announced they are taking steps to reduce hanko use. Some banks, including Mizuho, are switching to online lending contracts that will not require the seals.

But challenges remain. Hanko use is so deep-rooted in parts of the country that many municipal governments erroneously believe it is a requirement for some types of official documents.

For example, working parents are required to submit what is known as a "certificate of employment" when applying for a daycare spot for their children. The federal government, and in particular the Council for Regulatory Reform, has been adamant in saying that hanko is not needed for these forms, even sending a notice reminding local authorities of this fact last month. Nonetheless, many municipal governments still require company seals as part of the application.

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The situation illustrates that other forms of verification, such as electronic signatures, may need to be more widely accepted in order to wean some parts of Japanese society off their hanko dependency.

Economic Revitalization Minister Nishimura Yasutoshi spoke at a news conference on July 26, saying that businesses should extend work-from-home measures and stagger working hours to prevent the spread of the virus. Amid rapidly increasing numbers of infections, speeding up the review of administrative practices, such as the use of hanko, is needed to bring business processes in line with these measures.