

Coronavirus catalyses overdue change in Japan's offices (Financial Times article July 23, 2020)
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Coronavirus catalyses overdue change in Japan's offices Big-name corporations are finally confronting the inefficiencies of workplace culture Crush hour: Tokyo commuters before Covid-19, which has accelerated efforts to encourage remote working © Alamy Share on twitter (opens new window) Share on facebook (opens new window) Share on linkedin (opens new window) Share Save Leo Lewis JULY 22 2020 1 Print this page Get instant email alerts In early July, six months after Japan reported its first case of coronavirus, the technology group Fujitsu made a striking announcement. Under its new plan for life alongside the virus, office space will be halved, smaller hubs set up around the country and telework will become the “new normal” for the company’s 80,000 staff in Japan. The practical implications were huge, but the symbolism was arguably even greater. Fujitsu has tried many times before to cast itself as a bold innovator on workplace and sustainability issues, but it has been unable to shake the image of being another large, conservative Japanese corporation with the usual range of traditional, labour-intensive working practices and conventions at its core. Now, under the strange propellant force of Covid-19, Fujitsu appears to be admitting that some of the greatest time and energy drains of Japanese working life — including strict office hours, presenteeism and constant travel for face-to-face meetings — may finally have been exposed as at least partially unnecessary. Other companies have also begun to describe the pandemic’s accelerant effect on once lacklustre or stalled “workstyle” reform. In what Fujitsu hopes will be the key to making all this have any effect, its announcement also mentioned a plan to introduce a new management system to evaluate work and break down the culture of presenteeism, age-based seniority and long hours that has proven the greatest source of resistance to real change. For many, the guess was that Fujitsu would be an outlier: while it might be comparatively straightforward for a technology and communications giant to make such a leap, would other parts of corporate Japan be so enthusiastic about radical alterations to the office and travelling culture? The answer, says Hironori Kamezawa, chief executive of Japan’s largest banking group, MUFG, may increasingly be “yes”.

The pandemic, he says, is having an “irreversible influence” on societal structure and is accelerating initiatives around social issues, the environment and sustainability. Within that, Mr Kamezawa adds, fundamental shifts in working style away from face-to-face meetings and large-building-centred commuting are now a clear direction both for his own company and for MUFG’s thousands of business clients. Snackmaker Calbee said the efficiency of hundreds of workers had risen since March, when they were freed from office life. Other big corporate names have also announced changes that would not have seemed possible when the year began. Conglomerate Hitachi has set itself a target in which just half of its 33,000 employees in Japan will be required to report to the office for work. Calbee, the maker of snack foods, announced an indefinite extension of its current teleworking policies after it acknowledged that the efficiency of hundreds of workers had actually risen since March, when they were freed from the strictures of office life. After decades of silently accepting the status quo, the voices welcoming Japan’s “new normal” are becoming louder. An internal survey showed just under two-thirds of Calbee’s staff had no wish to return to pre-pandemic work habits. Although many expect that the pull of traditional working patterns will eventually reassert itself, some are already convinced that the publicly announced strategies of Fujitsu, Calbee and others might become the rule rather than the exception in some sectors. Nobuyuki Sato, who teaches traffic policy at Asia University, believes that Covid-19 may have pushed Japan’s great metropolises to a tipping-point they might otherwise have spent years reaching. Average daily round trips of 80 minutes on commuter trains packed at 200 per cent capacity, he says, have created tens of millions of people who would be delighted if there were an alternative. “Once people get used to remote work, they probably will go to the office two to three times a week and the rest of the week, they can work at a co-working space near home. Even without corona, such people are increasing,” says Mr Sato. “So, from now on, in metropolitan areas like Tokyo, Nagoya, Osaka, Fukuoka, train passengers will fall by 30 per cent over the next three to five years.” The pressure for change has been growing for some time, partly as a result of demographics. Japan is in the grip of long-term population decline and for a steadily increasing number of companies, “sustainability” is a hard practical matter of securing sufficient staff for the business model to remain viable. This was the subtext of an eye-catching advertising campaign in recent years by the digital communications group BellFace, which straightforwardly questioned the efficiency of Japan’s large armies of sales staff, with their seemingly unbreakable tradition of permanent travel and face-to-face meetings. In showing a young sales rep saving himself and the company hours of unnecessary travel through remote working, the message was that Japanese companies need not just new software, but a wholesale change of mindset too. BellFace admits that this will not be easy. “Compared with overseas, where non-face-to-

face sales are the mainstream, Japan has a small land area and well-developed transport network,” a spokesman says. He adds that, for many companies, all the knowhow of existing staff is concentrated on face-to-face sales, making change that much more difficult. Yet something seems to have changed. Between the end of March and May, some 12,000 companies applied for BellFace’s remote working software and existing customers quadrupled their usage. For all the distinctiveness of Japan’s workplace culture, it may be just as susceptible as other rich countries to the changes catalysed by coronavirus.

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