

# Telework boom pushes Japan's business card culture to go digital

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Online conferences and social media make old-fashioned card exchanges difficult

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TOKYO -- The new coronavirus is upending one of Japan's most basic business conventions -- the exchange of business cards.

A drastic reduction in the number of business meetings means fewer opportunities to swap cards, and more Japanese -- especially young people -- are turning to social media for their professional networking needs. Those trends have companies that cater to Japan's business card market scrambling to adapt.

Businesspeople are also trying to cope. A woman in her thirties working for a staffing agency in Tokyo has been struggling with the changes. Her workplace started remote working in April, so she has been unable to exchange cards with prospective clients on teleconferences.

"In teleconferences, I can catch the names of people speaking, but I often feel uncomfortable about not knowing their titles," she said. "It's hard to ask people's titles, so you don't know who has the decision-making power." When it is unclear who is in charge of a project, for example, she is uncertain about who is the point of contact, she said.

In 2018, 3 billion business cards traded hands in Japan, according to an estimate by Sansan, the largest provider of business card management

software. Exchanging cards is an important custom, because it helps people figure out where they stand in relation to each other, and to know their roles in corporate hierarchy or government bureaucracy.

Teleworking makes this more difficult, and Sansan is working on a digital alternative to traditional card exchanges.

In May, the company added a new feature to "Eight," its personal business card management software. It allows participants in video conferences on platforms like Zoom to create QR codes that lead to their business card information. The other participants can read the code with their smartphones to access the information.

The company also modified its service for corporate clients, "Sansan," which is used by about 6,000 companies. Now users can access business card information through URLs.

Sansan had been working to digitize the information on business cards, but its approach has been to capture that information from physical cards using devices like smartphones or scanners and then upload it.

"Paper business cards have been the starting point for our services," said Yusuke Otsu, the company's chief product officer.

The number of business cards read through the firm's services in early May plunged by more than 60% from a year earlier.

Even after the pandemic, teleworking is likely here to stay. 63% of respondents in a mid-May survey by the Japan Productivity Center, a think tank, said they would continue teleworking even after the outbreak is brought under control.

Other companies are also racing to develop new services to fit the new business environment.

Job-searching website Wantedly has added features to its business card management app that allow its 4 million users to list information about their career and skills. The number of business cards read by the company's app in April dropped by 30% compared with January.

Wantedly CEO Akiko Naka said the company will focus on enhancing users' ability to manage their business networks online without exchanging business cards.

It is unclear when the practice of exchanging cards came to Japan, but its importance is widely recognized at this point. Many Japanese companies offer special lectures on how to properly exchange business cards as part of their training programs for new employees.

Business cards in the U.S. and Europe carry less importance, and they are often exchanged at the end of a meeting, rather than the beginning. Social media is also becoming a more common means of introduction. LinkedIn, a professional networking platform, boasts more than 690 million registered users worldwide.

More than 169 million people in the U.S. use the service, which was bought by Microsoft for \$26.2 billion in 2016.

LinkedIn users can share detailed information about their academic records, professional careers and skill sets, along with their employers and titles. Many people find work through the website, with one hire occurring worldwide every seven seconds.

The coronavirus pandemic has underscored the power of social media. When Uber Technologies announced a plan to cut thousands of jobs worldwide, it published its employees' individual LinkedIn profiles on its website.

Business cards showing affiliations with specific companies and organizations have been a convenient networking tool in Japan, where lifetime employment has long been the norm, said Shin Murakami, head of LinkedIn Japan.

But the spread of teleworking is prompting more companies to hire people for specific skills and expertise, a trend bound to boost the number of business and employment-oriented online services like LinkedIn.

LinkedIn has yet to duplicate its success in the West in Japan, where it has only 2 million registered users. The company's main rival in Japan -- other than traditional business cards -- is Facebook Messenger. Many people, especially those working for internet service companies and startups, use Messenger as communications tool that is more casual than email.

The notion of "your business card is your face" reflects how Japanese business people reach out to potential customers and build their business networks. But the way people work is changing rapidly, and Japan's traditional business cards will have to change with it.