Telework in a Land of Overwork: It’s Not that Simple, Or Is It?

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted labor markets around the world. Workers and corporations scrambled to adjust their workstyles to a new normal, by avoiding the commute and working remotely from their homes or elsewhere. Japan is a country that stood out for its inability to adjust to the remote work environment. Comparative statistics show that Japan reported the lowest number of people engaged in remote work among the OECD countries, as well as the lowest percentage of corporations that offered remote work policies.

In this paper, I investigate why telework in Japan is difficult. The lack of telework in Japan may seem paradoxical, given the country’s reputation for being technologically advanced. I argue that it is not the technological infrastructure that is lacking in the Japanese workplace, but distinct features of work embedded in Japanese culture and its collectivist roots that prevent the effective implementation of telework. I rely on recently published data from various sources, and apply key sociological theories such as implicit contracts, gift exchange, dramaturgy and impression management to substantiate my main arguments. The paper concludes by drawing on implications for the future of work in Japan.