Title

COVID-19 in Japan: A Cross-Sectional Analysis on the COVID-19 Pandemic's Effects on Corporate Japan

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Abstract

The coronavirus and the subsequent COVID-19 pandemic has brought about unprecedented changes throughout the world. The focus of this research is analyzing how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected corporations in Japan and how that has reflected on current shifts in management styles. When COVID-19 hit Japan in March 2020, the Japanese workforce moved online to telework and had to adapt to the new reality of motivating a remote workforce and dealing with new hurdles. This research seeks to highlight not only the challenges that Japanese corporations and the employees of such corporations have had to face, but also the catalytic nature that the pandemic has created when it comes to transforming the Japanese corporate culture.

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Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic spreads around the world, one country that has been able to flatten the curve and mitigate the spread of the virus on a national scale is Japan, especially in the Greater Tokyo Area, an area that holds 30% of the country's population[1]. During a time when land and open space have been key resources in curbing the spread of COVID-19, the over-populated Greater Tokyo Area has overcome the lack of available open space due to the cooperative national culture that respects and follows governmental mandates and social "norms". Parady et al. describe how COVID-related stay-at-home orders, business closures, and quarantine restrictions have not been legally binding or connected to punishment, and thus were reliant on "self-restriction" and compliance by the Japanese people[2]. And while the Japanese nation has worked together to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic, it still faces internal issues and challenges that differ from those that Japanese corporations and the nation had faced during past crises, such as the 2009 influenza outbreak or the 2011 Great East Japan earthquake.

As of the date of writing this thesis, vaccination programs comparable to the ones used during the 2009 influenza outbreak have only recently become available in Japan to mitigate the current pandemic[3]. This has meant that for most of the year 2020, Japan has been forced to look for new ways in which its corporate culture to implement new and more comprehensive strategies to adapt to the effects of the pandemic. Working from home, also known as

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1 Tokyo Metropolitan Government. TOKYO'S HISTORY, GEOGRAPHY, AND POPULATION. Retrieved from https://www.metro.tokyo.lg.jp/ENGLISH/ABOUT/HISTORY/history02.htm

2 Parady, G., A. Taniguchi, and K. Takami. 2020. Travel behavior changes during the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan: Analyzing the effects of risk perception and social influence on going-out self-restriction. Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives 7. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trip.2020.100181

3 Sasaki, N., R. Kuroda, K. Tsuno, and N. Kawakami. 2020. Workplace responses to COVID-19 associated with mental health and work performance of employees in Japan. Journal of Occupational Health 62(1). https://doi.org/10.1002/1348-9585.12134

teleworking, has increased in both support and usage since the initiation of Japan's nationwide lockdown in April of 2020. A survey from the Japanese Business Federation shows a 29.2% increase from March to April of 2020 of companies instituting teleworking initiatives[4]. This shift has shown Japanese managers and executives the need to rethink the corporate culture and management styles as they proceed through the pandemic. Even as telework acceptance has increased, a report from Keio University shows that the Japanese telework rate was still low in comparison to other countries[5]. It is important to understand the attitudes towards teleworking as it will be indicative of the possibility for long-term adoption of the practice within Japanese culture, even once the global pandemic begins to subside. In direct contrast to the current model of long days at the office and poor work-life balance, widespread preferences for teleworking could initiate a reevaluation of productivity and worker engagement for the long run for Japanese corporations.

The purpose of this thesis is to highlight – through the lenses of public policy, history, sociology and business – how the year 2020 presented an ever-changing COVID-19 pandemic and how that has affected Japanese corporations and individual workers across all levels of management. How have Japanese workers, managers and corporations had to adapt to their changing environments and social norms? What aspects of Japanese business practices or culture have had to change because of the pandemic? And what aspects are able to change more quickly because of the pandemic? This research focuses on the scale and scope of the pandemic's effects on Japan, and more specifically Tokyo, to analyze how Japan has come to realize the need for

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4 Tokyo: Keidanren - Japanese Business Federation. 2020. *Measures to prevent the spread of new coronavirus infections associated with the issuance of a state of emergency Follow-up survey on the response of each company* [PDF].

5 Keio University. 2020. Research on Telework and the Actual Conditions of Workers Under the Spread of COVID-19. Available at https://www.keio.ac.jp/en/press-releases/2020/Jul/29/49-73470/.

adaptation to COVID across various industries, and connects these changes with past corporate developments, whether they be due to past crises or the natural progression of time. This thesis will look at how, on the one hand, Japan's adaptations to the coronavirus pandemic allowed it to "flatten the curve", and on the other, how the country still seemed to be behind other western countries in terms of business practices.

A critical analysis of Japan's past crisis management tactics, either by corporations or the nation, is the starting point for this research, and is analyzed in comparison to Japan's current crisis management tactics and reactions. Additionally, this paper discusses the impacts on both work-life and home-life as men and women have adapted to their new roles and responsibilities, and how this is different from past crises, such as the 2011 Great East Japan earthquake. This is important as it highlights the effect that working from home has had on the Japanese populous's mentality, and the developments and changes in expectations when it comes to work-life balance and productivity, especially in regards to gender. This paper highlights the effects of telework on not only the current workforce, but also its current effect on expanding the Japanese workforce in terms of gender and generational diversity.

Gender roles within the Japanese culture will be analyzed within this thesis and research, with special focus on gender expectations and differences in treatment in business contexts, in order to understand if and how Japanese corporate women are affected by telework and the pandemic differently than men. Do women face different stressors, and/or how has telework had an impact on the lives of women when it comes to navigating the business environment, home life and personal experience. Interview responses will be contextualized with past published literature in order to analyze the source and extent of the changes and expectations that Japanese corporate women face, and to understand if/how these women are handling and adapting to them.

While this paper does not seek to specifically cover the topic of gender inequality, it is important to note its influence on Japanese corporate culture.

Literature Review

Due to the newness and ever-changing situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is less current literature and data available concerning Japanese businesses' and the Japanese nation's reaction and adaptation to the pandemic. However, initial survey data and studies into the workforce mentality and corporate strategies in Japan provide insight into changes felt in Japan during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically from March 2020, when the coronavirus was declared a global pandemic, until the end of 2020. A contextualized narrative will be created via the understanding of past Japanese crisis management strategies and executions, a brief historical overview of the shifts in Japanese management styles, and an introduction into the state and culture of the Japanese workforce, specifically looking at gender equality.

Crisis Management

The coronavirus pandemic is not the first time that Japan has faced a large-scale national crisis, i.e. the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake. During the 2011 crisis, the Japanese public relied on the government for disclosure and communication of information for a personal assessment of the danger of the crisis. But, as Kaneko and Suzuki state, the Japanese government fell victim to the minimization of the extent of the problem, and unclear distribution of information to the public[6]. But, this was not the only time that Japan faced issues of clarity and

6 Suzuki I., Kaneko Y. 2013. Managing Fukushima NPS Accidents: In Particular Focus on Government Crisis Communication. In: Japan's Disaster Governance. Public Administration, Governance and Globalization, vol 4. https://doi-org.libproxy.berkeley.edu/10.1007/978-1-4614-

communicating important information to its citizens. When then Prime Minister Shinzo Abe instituted a nationwide state of emergency, Dąbrowski notes that a "lack of specifics" concerning the new mandate made the government's directive less effective[7]. While many within Japan's government, both on the national and local levels, criticized Abe's slow response to the pandemic and initiating a state of emergency, it is important to note that, compared to past crises, the situation with the COVID-19 pandemic has been uncharted territory, more volatile than past disease outbreaks, and has been an ever-evolving situation.

Due to the design of the Japanese government on a more localized level, i.e. 47 prefectures each with their own local government, issues of disorder and lack of communication have often arisen during crises. Furukawa describes how local governments enjoy elected power and advantages over local policy, national policy and government often faces "fragmentation" and coordination between prefectures is often lacking[8]. This has often led to significantly different reactions to crisis, and further differences in regards to subsequent policy and management. For example, during the immediate aftermath of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, and the subsequent nuclear power plant failure in Fukushima, government agencies were unable to provide clear and complete data to the public. While some of this was due to geographic differences, and thus differences in reactions, a large part of the problem when it came to disaster-response was the lack of clear information communication[9]. This meant not

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7 Dąbrowski, A. 2020. Japan and the COVID-19 Pandemic. In: The Polish Institute of International Affairs, No. 81. https://w ww.ceeol.com/search/gray-literature-detail?id=857260

8 Furukawa, Shun'ichi. 2000. "An Institutional Framework for Japanese Crisis Management." Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management 8, no. 1: 3–14. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.00119.

9 Suzuki I., Kaneko Y. (2013) Managing Fukushima NPS Accidents: In Particular Focus on Government Crisis Communication. In: Japan's Disaster Governance. Public Administration, Governance and Globalization, vol 4. Springer, New York, NY. https://doi-org.libproxy.berkeley.edu/10.1007/978-1-4614-6151-7_5

only was the government unsure of who was responsible for initial reactions and responses, but the Japanese people were left to essentially find their own information in order to determine how to respond. Similar problems have arisen again in Japan due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While one must keep in mind that the newness and unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic presents challenges in-and-of-itself, corporations and the government bodies of Japan have also made the task of coping with the pandemic harder. These will be discussed further later on in the paper.

Japanese businesses have also faced short-comings when it comes to crisis management, whether that be short-comings in the initial reactions or errors made in the long-term response. For example, some Japanese corporations will be willing to apologize for the effects of certain errors or mistakes, but will not directly identify the errors made by the company. This occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s when the Toshiba Corporation allowed for an illegal sale of technology to the Soviet Union, which put their military capabilities ahead of the Americans. While the larger issue was the sale and the advantage that the Soviet Union gained from such a sale, the focus for this paper is on Toshiba's response. Instead of taking ownership of the mistake and accepting the consequences for the events, Toshiba disassociated itself from the problem, offered a general apology statement, and avoided naming or elaborating on the error[10]. While this example specifically highlights Toshiba, the idea of little to no ownership of short-comings is one to be noted.

But, looking at Japan's crisis management history, it is not all negative and criticized. A research survey by Muto et al. reported that in the months of March and April of 2020,

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10 Hearit, Keith Michael. 1994. "Apologies and Public Relations Crises at Chrysler, Toshiba, and Volvo." Public Relations Review 20, no. 2: 113–25. https://doi.org/10.1016/0363-8111(94)90053-1.

approximately 85% of the Japanese public were following some form of behavioral change, namely social distancing, due to the coronavirus pandemic[11]. This widespread response is due to Japan's cultural affinity for respecting authority and laws, which is especially important when considering that there was an absence of official punishment for breaking government and local mandates concerning "stay at home" orders and social distancing.

Teleworking

Working from home, also known as teleworking, has increased in both support and usage since the initiation of Japan's nationwide lockdown in April. A survey from the Japanese Business Federation shows a 29.2% increase from March to April of companies instituting teleworking initiatives[12]. This shift has shown Japanese managers and executives the need to rethink the corporate culture and management styles as they proceed through the pandemic. Even as telework acceptance increases, a report from Keio University shows that the Japanese telework rate is still low in comparison to other countries[13]. It is important to understand the attitudes towards teleworking as it will be indicative of the possibility for long-term adoption of the practice within Japanese culture. In direct contrast to the current model of long days at the office and poor work-life balance, widespread preferences for teleworking could initiate a reevaluation of productivity and worker engagement for the long run.

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11 Muto, K., Yamamoto, I., Nagasu, M., Tanaka, M., & Wada, K. 2020. Japanese citizens' behavioral changes and preparedness against COVID-19: An online survey during the early phase of the pandemic. Retrieved from https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0234292#pone-0234292-t002

12 Tokyo: Keidanren - Japanese Business Federation. 2020. *Measures to prevent the spread of new coronavirus infections associated with the issuance of a state of emergency Follow-up survey on the response of each company* [PDF].

13 Keio University. 2020. Research on Telework and the Actual Conditions of Workers Under the Spread of COVID-19. Available at https://www.keio.ac.jp/en/press-releases/2020/Jul/29/49-73470/.

But, Japan's history with accepting telework has been a relatively recent development. A 2017 survey conducted by Deloitte Tohmatsu Consulting saw a substantial increase from 2013 to 2017 in work style reforming, especially in the area of allowing telework[14]. One main reason for this slow and hesitant adoption of telework is due to the continuation of old business practices, such as fax, in person meetings and especially the Hanko signature system. As Roldán notes, the Hanko signature system requires that workers go in to work in order to carry out regular business functions and processes, like paying checks, signing documents and certifying letters[15]. Because this system has been crucial for regular business operations, in addition to a distrust of online banking or signatures, companies have been limited in their ability to digitize and adopt telework in order to modernize and adapt.

Gender inequality

Japan's workplace and society have historically been male-dominated. Even as the country moves into the 21st century and gender equity and gender equality become more part of the discussion, Aronsson notes that Japanese women in the workforce are still combating "conventional notions of femininity and negotiat[ing] new gender roles and cultural meanings"[16]. The battle for gender equality, especially in the workplace, faces an uphill battle, namely against the corporate idea of "shūshin koyō" ( ) or lifetime employment, and the societal idea of

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14 Vogel, S.K. (2018). Japan's Labor Regime in Transition: Rethinking Work for a Shrinking Nation. The Journal of Japanese Studies 44(2), 257-292. https://doi.org/10.1353/jjs.2018.0039

15 Roldán, Maria. EFENews Service. Hanko signature system disrupts telework in japan: JAPAN TELEWORK. https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.berkeley.edu/wire-feeds/hanko-signature-system-disrupts-telework-japan/docview/2395464871/se-2?accountid=14496

16 Aronsson, Anne Stefanie. 2020. "Contemporary Japanese Career Women: Reflections on Profession, Life, and Purpose." *The Qualitative Report* 25, no. 3: 569–95. https://search.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/contemporary-japanese-career-women-reflections-on/docview/2377697667/se-2?accountid=14496

“ryōsai kenbo” ( ) or “good wife, wise mother”. Both ideas stem from the earlier half of the 20th century in Japan and have remained embedded in Japanese business and society, albeit in different forms.

The idea of lifetime employment is not an official or explicit idea, but rather a deeply rooted practice that is centered around the employee and employee loyalty. Moriguchi and Hiroshi explain that lifetime employment is a way to decrease employee turnover, but is difficult to undo as there is no binding contract beyond an “implicit handshake”[17]. The reason this practice has been damaging for women attempting to enter the workforce is because the men do not leave, and thus there are fewer entry points into the workforce. Mentale and Matsui noted that from 1998 to 2008, there was only a 4.6% closure of the employment tenure gap between men and women in Japan[18]. Men were the majority in the workforce and remained there longer compared to women.

But, this has not been the only hurdle that women faced when it came to trying to enter the workforce and gain equity. As previously stated, Japanese women had to overcome the longstanding notion of being home-makers and serving the primary purpose of raising the children, especially sons. This phenomenon is described as “ryōsai kenbo” ( ) or “good wife, wise mother”. Though the phenomenon has evolved over the years and seen different iterations, Mun and Jung highlight that globalization and foreign investment into Japan have seen a forced readjustment of corporate Japan’s view of women in the workplace[19]. This external pressure was

17 Moriguchi, Chiaki, and Hiroshi Ono. 2004. “INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE IN JAPAN JAPANESE LIFETIME EMPLOYMENT: A CENTURY’S PERSPECTIVE,” n.d., 35. https://swopec.hhs.se/eijswp/papers/eijswp0205.pdf

18 Matanle, P. and Matsui, K. (2011) Lifetime employment in 21st century Japan: Stability and resilience under pressure in the Japanese management system. In S. A. Horn (ed.) Emerging perspectives in Japanese human resource management, Berlin: Peter Lang: 15-44. http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/78020/1/MatanleMatsuiEPJHRM2011_Deposit.pdf

19 Mun, Eunmi, and Jiwook Jung. 2018. “Change above the Glass Ceiling: Corporate Social Responsibility and Gender Diversity in Japanese Firms.” Administrative Science Quarterly 63,

not necessarily a specific call to action for Japan, but a necessity to keep up with the times and modernize the working woman's gender role through the lens of corporate social responsibility.

More recent steps were made in 2013 when then Prime Minister Abe introduced the idea of "*womanomics*". Hamada explains how this new initiative was aimed at increasing Japanese women's ability to re-enter the workforce after childbirth, and was succeeding; hitting a record high of 64% female labor participation in 2014[20]. There seemed to be hope for Japan in terms of increasing gender equality, but the 2020 World Economic Forum (WEF) Global Gender Gap Report (GGGR) ranked Japan 115th in "Economic Participation and Opportunity"[21]. And now the COVID-19 pandemic has further shifted the gender equality in Japan as more men spend time at home and the traditional gender roles and responsibilities shift.

Research Design

This cross-sectional research employed individual interviews and group discussions which resulted in comparable qualitative data on demographics, attitudes and preferences of the respondents. Approximately 20 individual interviews were conducted, and 30 other individuals were interviewed in group settings, all conducted over Zoom and video call. Interviews were conducted with Japanese professionals from various industries, which were subsequently coded to analyze similar trends and talking points. This also allowed for a holistic analysis of cultural behavior and attitudes, such as willingness to share information or provide criticism, which was subsequently studied to understand its influence on the adaptations taken by either the Japanese

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no. 2: 409–40. https://doi.org/10.1177/0001839217712920.

20 Tomoko Hamada (2018) Japanese Company's Cultural Shift for Gender Equality at Work, Global Economic Review, 47:1, 63-87, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/1226508X.2017.1393725

21 Schwab, Klaus, Robert Crotti, Thierry Geiger, Vesselina Ratcheva, and World Economic Forum. 2020. Global Gender Gap Report 2020 Insight Report. Geneva: World Economic Forum. http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2020/dataexplorer.

nation as a whole, corporations, or individuals. While there are numerous scholarly articles pertaining to corporate Japan's immediate, reactionary response and coping strategies relating to the COVID-19 pandemic, this new data provided insight into how the responses and feelings of Japanese workers have changed and the reasoning behind such changes.

Interview Structure

The main mode of data collection was numerous qualitative interviews, which primarily served as opportunities for individuals to provide context to open-ended questions. Individuals were selected as interviewees based on one of two criteria: 1) they had to be employed full-time, and 2) were above the age of 18. These interviews consisted of open-ended questions asking about the transition period adapting during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially as they related to the individual's experience and opinions of teleworking, the changes in job experience, and personal feelings during a time of working remotely. Interviews were conducted remotely, as the COVID-19 pandemic prevented me from traveling to Japan and conducting interviews in person. While this did hinder better identification of non-verbal communication like body language, the online interviews were recorded which allowed for a coded analysis of the transcripts. Questions were formulated and then analyzed to highlight trends of commonalities between responses, and also provided insight to differences in responses between demographic groups, along the lines of sex, age, job industry and nationality.

Scholarly Articles, and Company and Government Reports

Numerous scholarly articles on topics such as Japanese management styles and crisis management were analyzed to create a comparison point between pre-COVID Japan and Japan

during the beginning of the COVID pandemic, specifically around March and April 2020. Several studies on Japanese national or individualist culture, such as cultural norms and behavior, were chosen to create an understanding as to why Japanese individuals have a certain mindset or reaction, or lack thereof. All of the scholarly articles selected were either written and published directly in English or were translated before publishing. It was also ensured that the articles were from the last 30 years so as to maintain relevance and provide more recent historical background, while also not distracting from the selected timeframe of this research (March 2020 to December 2020). The gap in information from existing literature comes when looking at more recent developments in the acceptance and possible preference for teleworking. This is due to a lack of significant amounts of recent literature and widespread reporting, and also the fact that this research focuses on a more recent time frame.

Major Findings

For this study I interviewed approximately 50 working Japanese individuals over video calls. While approximately 15 of these interviews were in a one-on-one setting, the remaining were group discussions comparable to a panel question and answer format. The latter format of interviews offered interviewees to have more of a discussion as they learned about other interviewees' perspectives and experiences. The findings of those interviews, and subsequent comparison to already published data, are presented so as to focus on three primary areas: 1. The shift to telework and digitalization; 2. The personal effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Japanese workforce; and 3. The changes in work relations and corporate behavior, with a special focus on managers and communication. This will allow for a better understanding of the impact

that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on multiple aspects of Japanese business and life, and how those effects have been mitigated or adapted to from March 2020 to December 2020.

Before commencing my interviews and conducting the secondary-source research, I hypothesized that the shift to telework in Japan had a significant impact on Japanese workers and corporations. This was based on the belief that while some consider Japan to be technologically advanced, it still fell victim to the unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, like most other countries. Conducting interviews with currently employed Japanese professionals, aged 18 and older, would allow me to gain an understanding of if my hypothesis was true, and to what magnitude. Interviewees from diverse industries were chosen to develop a broader understanding of the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, and also to understand what industries in Japan are adjusting differently or better than others. Seeing the extent to which business has been disrupted around the globe, it is difficult to narrow down an industry that is the hardest hit by the pandemic. The reason for this preliminary conclusion is that each industry has to adapt to and overcome its own difficulties, and those difficulties vary between corporations within the industry.

Teleworking and Digitalization

As was highlighted previously in this paper, Japan has experienced some hesitancy towards adopting teleworking and digitalization. As the COVID-19 pandemic became a reality for Japan in March of 2020, corporations realized better teleworking and digitalization infrastructure was needed in order to allow for better remote working on behalf of the employees, and to begin updating certain characteristics of Japanese business practices. An interviewee that shed light on how companies have adapted to the need for updated technology

in day-to-day operations was with Mr. Nagatsu, a high-level manager at a trading company, who has been at the company for over a decade. While he considers himself "tech-savvy" and has the ability to easily work remotely, the company he works at has had to help certain employees, especially those who may be older and those with bad internet connectivity at home. "We've had to provide hot-spots, greenscreens and even training at times to help some of those working from home." In a Bloomberg article, ranking Japanese government officials stated that unless the Japanese nation is the catalytic force to have a significant shift towards digitalization, Japan will fall further behind compared to other countries[22]. Not only is Japan having to play catch-up in terms of technological processes and digitalization, but they also face the human issue of transitioning workers to these new systems. This has been difficult for some companies and managers who have had to also help the older generations of workers who are accustomed to working in person and being able to walk down a hallway to get clarification. Many of Mr. Nagatsu's direct reports are older and while they have been at the company for a long time and know the processes and procedures very well, the transition has forced them to relearn certain processes and operations that are done through new, digital methods, such as email and electronic signatures.

A similar account came from Ms. Fujitsu, a female financial investor in her mid-40s. She only recently started working at an investment company, and has people to whom she reports, and people who directly report to her. When asked what the challenges of telework have been, both for herself and for those whom she works with, she responded as such:

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22 Urabe, Emi, & Takeo, Yuko. 2020. Digitalization Could Double Japan's Growth, Reform Panelist Says. Retrieved March 25, 2021, from https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-10-22/digitalization-could-double-japan-s-growth-reform-panelist-says

> "I have had some troubles transitioning due to helping the older employees transition and still making sure I maintain communication with my other staff. The younger employees are having an easier time since they are up-to-date with the technology. But the older employees are having a hard time learning."

The difficulties in adapting to telework seemed to differ according to age, which can possibly be attributed to two factors: 1) an inherently learned ability to use technology among younger, working professionals, and 2) antiquated business practices which older employees have become accustomed to during their professional lives. While the first factor is slightly more speculative, the second does have backing behind it as numerous studies concur that Japanese businesses and corporations are still operating with old systems that have long been replaced in many Western countries. The most significant of these factors is the Hanko system of manually signing or stamping documents. Roldán highlights that it is not the Hanko system that is entirely to blame for slowing the shift to telework, but also the hesitancy of older, working professionals to adapt to the more modernized modes of operating. "It was not believed that we would get to the current situation and suddenly changing procedures is not possible."[23] Adapting from a system of personally stamping documents and signing stacks of paper to digitization and using programs like DocuSign has been hard for some Japanese companies as the workers are not completely trustworthy of the processes.

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23 Roldan, Maria. 2020. "Hanko signature system disrupts telework in Japan: JAPAN TELEWORK." EFE News Service. http://search.proquest.com/ibss/docview/2395464871/citation/719F0C1C9DED4E56PQ/1.

Japan has also created structural issues within corporations as older generations are both protected but limited by the promise of lifetime employment. This system of lifetime employment has been generally beneficial because it allows employees to remain at a corporation long enough to become specialists in their respective areas. For example, Mrs. Hiyashi is in her late 60's and has been working at a consulting firm for the last 30 years. She has stayed in a similar role for several years and before the pandemic was very comfortable with her day-to-day tasks. "When we had to change how we did business, I felt like I had started a new job." Mrs. Hiyashi continued to explain that she had to not only learn how to navigate the new teleworking format of her job, but also had to handle the new technologies and processes that the company had developed because of COVID-19.

Mr. Sato is a male in his early thirties, and works as an office administrator. He has signed documents online before, but not so often for his job and often is required to sign documents by hand, or by stamp, at the office. However, Mr. Sato explained that COVID-19 has actually made the Hanko signature system more difficult as offices are at reduced capacity due to employees self-quarantining or working from home. "Documents are signed and stamped every two weeks...if you miss that window, you have to wait." This was interesting to note because while Japan often seems to be an example of technological innovation, namely in the eyes of the United States, Junzo Iida highlights that the shift the electronic signatures in Japan has been hesitant and even limited, especially by the further need for an identification verification document to prove the signator's identity[24]. This is made even more difficult considering that in Japan, DocuSign is not a valid signature method or alternative for documents that need to be

24 Iida, Junzo. 2020. "Digital Transformation vs COVID-19: The Case of Japan." Text.Serial.Journal. Digital Law Journal. https://doi.org/10.38044/2686-9136-2020-1-2-8-16.

notarized[25]. Even while Japan tries to take steps towards digitalization in the age of COVID-19, there are still cultural boundaries, both professionally and societally. When asked why corporate Japan might be behind in terms of digitalization and the shift to telework, Mr. Sato explained that there is "distrust" of electronic signatures, and that even he is worried that he may miss something that he otherwise would have caught if he had a physical document or paperwork in front of him.

Ignoring the technological issues with the shift to telework, the concept of telework seemed to have the capacity to allow older generations the chance to become more productive and have greater flexibility[26]. But, interviewee responses showed that this is not actually the case. The hasty and abrupt shift to teleworking, coupled with an elderly workforce that has become accustomed to in person and manual working conditions created a secondary issue for Japanese corporations at the beginning of the COVID pandemic in the months of March to May 2020. But, younger workers seemed to help mitigate issues as trouble-shooting became part of the exchange between younger and older generations.

Beyond the initial adaptation to telework, some Japanese workers were still acclimating to a work environment that had changed throughout the year. For some, this meant different work policies and the progressive reopening of offices. And for others, this meant abrupt changes in their day-to-day work life as new "waves" the pandemic set in, or as a coworker contracted COVID. For Mr. Fukuwara – a banker in his late 40s – the biggest changes were felt when his company began opening up the office again in mid-summer. But because he has a family and did

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25 Arnaut, Alex. 2015. "Japan." Text. DocuSign. https://www.docusign.com/how-it-works/legality/global/japan.

26 Kazekami, Sachiko. 2020. "Mechanisms to Improve Labor Productivity by Performing Telework." *Telecommunications Policy* 44, no. 2: 101868. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.telpol.2019.101868.

not feel that it would be responsible to go into work and risk exposing his family, he opted to telework.

> "Even though I was allowed to work from home, I would have to log on and have my camera on at all times so my manager could see me working. I was stressed because my children were doing school at home and my wife was also working. I was worried my manager would think I was not professional since my family could be seen behind me. You can't ask children and a family to be quiet all the time."

This is a narrative that was heard from many interviewees: small apartments with whole families now at home meant an invasion of work into the home. This was hard to adapt to for those with families, spouses or other people in the apartment or house because while some companies required it, the practice itself made workers uncomfortable and overly monitored. The reason this was also so disruptive for workers like Mr. Furukawa was that while meetings only go on for a short period of time, in which one could ask children to be quiet or to not run around, this new monitoring during the workday is constant and even occurred when Mr. Furukawa wanted to use the restroom or grab a drink. However, it is important to note that this remote monitoring on the company's part is not malicious or intended to be an invasion of privacy. Instead, this practice, as explained by Mrs. Haru – an executive at an international export company – is meant to help keep workers accountable and ensure that they are not slacking or taking a vacation at home. While Mrs. Haru did acknowledge that this can feel intrusive for some workers, she also explained that "it is not much different than if a person were physically present at the office where their manager would see them working." This was interesting to hear because

while it is understandable that companies want to ensure their employees are not drinking during the day or taking excessive breaks, and even to maintain a sense of immediate accessibility. With employees all logged onto the same communication platform, it allows for quicker problem solving and better task management than if employees had to wait for email responses or wait until a coworker logged on at some point in the day.

Telework and well-being of working individuals

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, many people downplayed its seriousness and took the mentality of the event being a passing disease. A Washington Post article stated that in March of 2020, Yokohama seemed as if all was normal as people were out in the streets and going about their day[27]. This aspect of Japanese life during this time of the pandemic is interesting to note because, as the pandemic progressed throughout 2020, there was a mentality change within Japan in regards to individual's attitude about the seriousness of the pandemic, and its effect on working individual's productivity, mentality and motivation. Individuals I interviewed spoke in great detail about how the pandemic has brought them to reevaluate how they adapt to the quarantine and Japan, and they explained what they have done to avoid "burning out" and lack of motivation when it comes to their profession.

I also interviewed Ms. Kamura, who is a working professional and mother in her mid-50s, and works for an entertainment company in Tokyo. Because of the pandemic, most of the company's operations and events have been moved online or remote, as have a majority of their meetings. Ms. Kamura explained that the company wants to make sure that on a regular day-to-

27 Denyer, Simon. 2020. "Perspective | Pandemic Journal: Family Life in Yokohama in the Time of Coronavirus." Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/pandemic-journal-family-life-in-yokohama-in-the-time-of-coronavirus/2020/03/15/222d2774-6555-11ea-8a8e-5c5336b32760_story.html.

day basis, employees are safe and remain healthy, and thus the company does not require employees to come into the office. However, for important events that are held remotely over mediums such as Zoom, employees and managers will come into the office to allow for faster communication and better internet connectivity. Ms. Kamura also explained that this also allowed the employees, herself included, to better motivate themselves and to stay connected to the work they were doing. When staying at home and working remotely, even though the company had numerous Zoom meetings throughout the week, Ms. Kamura told me that as the pandemic went on, it was often hard to feel motivated at home. “When we couldn’t go outside or see people, it was sad and felt hard to stay happy about work.” Even though telework allowed for individuals to avoid the long daily commute to and from work and provided more time at home with family, it was often this limiting on life and the end to “normal” daily habits that had a larger, more negative impact on individuals.

But it is not just older generations that are feeling the strain of isolation and decreased in person interaction. Ms. Yukiko is a female in her late 20s who, at the beginning of the pandemic, was a flight attendant for a small Japanese airline company but was forced to find another job as an executive assistant at a tech start-up due to the need for an additional revenue source. Not only was the process of finding a job difficult, but the transition from in person work and constant interaction to remote working and country-wide lockdown was difficult. According to Ms. Yukiko,

> “I go into work because I need to see people. If I stay at home in pajamas all day, I don’t feel like a person. I was used to seeing people in person everyday, and it has been weird not having that

anymore. I feel safe enough to go to work and that makes me feel better since I can get out of my apartment."

Ms. Yukiko's transition during the pandemic was difficult enough due to having to transition from in person work to remote work. But, also having to learn a new job and become familiar with coworkers, most of whom are male, was especially challenging via telework. As a flight attendant, Ms. Yukiko had become used to a workplace where she interacted with people daily and was active, but shifting jobs meant having to reestablish a work-life balance and find a way to feel comfortable both working remotely and in the office. As Ms. Yukiko explained her situation, it became clear that while she felt happy to have found another job during a time when not many companies were hiring, she did feel like she was out of place at first and had a hard time settling into her role. Telework makes this harder for individuals like Ms. Yukiko and others who have had to find new work because, as mentioned previously, communication and real-time correspondence is more difficult via telework and can result in near hires feeling lost or unassimilated. This was one factor that led Ms. Yukiko to choose to go into work once or twice a week in order to help make the transition easier.

Several other interviewees provided reasonings as to why they prefer in person work over telework. For example, Ms. Chisato, is in her mid-20s and works as an assistant and is often is required to go into work since her manager feels that it is important so employees do not begin to slack off or take "vacations at home". Ms. Chisato explained that at the beginning of the pandemic, she did not feel comfortable going into work because of the newness and unknowns of the situation, but as 2020 progressed, she believed that going into work was actually best for her mental health and her well-being. For her, and many others, this became especially important when the weather in Japan got colder, mainly from October to December. Ms. Chisato stated that

she went to work even more in colder months or when the weather was bad for long periods of time during the pandemic because otherwise she would feel depressed and would begin feeling disconnected from friends and even her work.

Mr. Konoshi is a male in his early thirties, and works as an office administrator. He recounted to me how the transition to telework itself was not difficult, as he was able to handle the technological aspect, but it was difficult navigating communications between himself and coworkers.

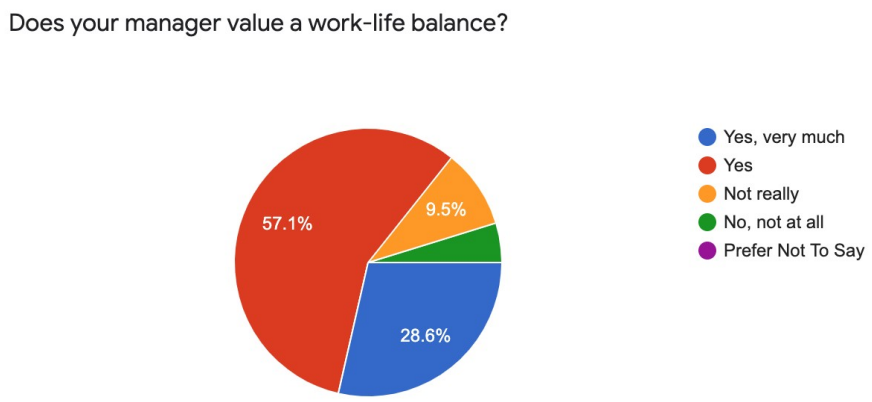
> "Work is no longer limited to your time at the office since individuals will be online at different times. The collaboration is gone since I can't walk to another office and talk through a problem I am having. And when my coworkers are online at different times than me, I am stressed because I worry the work will not get done on time."

Mr. Konishi serves as a prime example of how even for younger generations, telework and deadlines can often lead to a more stressful work environment, even if that work is remote. Even the reality that individuals are on different schedules, and thus may be working at different times, has been a challenge that corporate Japan has had to deal with as telework proves to be a long-term work method. But, on the other hand, Mr. Konishi did acknowledge that the flexible working hours that teleworking allows for, does help him break up his day and allows him to work when he feels productive, which could be late at night.

Beyond the effect that COVID-19 has been having on Japanese workers in regards to productivity and association with their job, the pandemic has also been having an impact on the personal mindset and well-being of the Japanese people. Previous studies have been done on

personal well-being of Japanese workers during COVID, and on the productivity of workers, but never together. While this study itself is not a psychological one, it is interesting to note how working professionals in Japan are sometimes using in person work as a form of self-care and a way to mitigate the isolation that has been felt at times during 2020.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about significant change when it comes to working conditions, attitudes towards work, and intercompany relations, this paper will briefly touch upon one other contributing factor that has been briefly alluded to: managers. This paper does not seek to slander managers or any particular management style, but rather simply highlight how managers can and have had an effect on worker mentality, both for the positive and negative. One aspect that has been previously discussed in this paper is how managers' expectations of performance and "work time" can have an effect on the experience of telework and work-life balance. For example, Mr. Furukawa, who was mentioned earlier in this paper, discussed how he felt additional stress working at home or even taking time off from work to spend with his family because of the pressure he felt to meet deadlines and expectations from his manager. After interviewing Mr. Furukawa and the rest of the study participants, interview responses were coded mentality so as to provide a more quantitative understanding of to what extent corporate employees feel managers contribute to the stress of teleworking. Below is the chart representing the interviewees' coded responses to the general question of "Does your manager value a work-life balance?"



While the above graphic shows that approximately 85% of interviewees did have some sense that their managers value a work-life balance. However, this still leaves 15% of interviewees whose managers do not value employee work-life balance. While this seemed inconsequential at first, interviewee responses highlighted how a lack of support from managers when it comes to work-life balance actually makes telework harder on employees. Of the interviewees whose responses were coded into the "not really" or "no, not at all" categories, Mrs. Yoshida provided a unique perspective on the situation. Mrs. Yoshida is in her mid-30s and has two young children, and has been working at a telecommunications company for the past 5 years. She explained to me during our interview that while she has been able to adapt to having her children learning from home and having her husband work from home, the difficult aspect of telework has been that her manager requires her to log into a dashboard during work hours, and her manager will often only reply to communications during normal work hours even though each individuals' schedules are different. This was a difficult transition for Mrs. Yoshida and others like her as it created a sense of guilt if she did not work at similar times as her manager, or it meant that her family also had to alter their day-to-day behavior and movements so as to not disturb Mrs. Yoshida while she was logged into her work dashboard. When asked why she believed her manager was so strict on these requirements and preferences, Mrs. Yoshida replied:

> "My manager is older. He is used to the old way of doing business. He does not like not seeing other employees so that is why we must log on. He never complains about seeing my children or husband behind me, but I feel like I must be professional."

Mrs. Yoshida's statements were echoed by other Japanese corporate professionals whom I interviewed. As discussed earlier, the difficult aspect of telework for professionals is often the guidelines that managers or superiors put in place. While these do help maintain some sense of normalcy and are in place so as to avoid a sense of vacation time, they can be especially difficult for individuals who have other professionals or children in their house as well.

The Effect on Women versus Men

As discussed earlier in this paper, Japan has a history of being a male-dominant culture, and has often relegated and limited women to the role of home-makers and mothers. While Japan, in recent years, has taken steps to try and create more gender equity in the workplace, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought different conditions and effects on working women than men, especially if those women are mothers.

As the Japanese workforce has moved to telework, women have had to establish their place in these new online spaces, especially during meetings and larger group discussions. Ms. Takumi, who is in her mid-50s and works at a consultancy firm, described how while her manager works to ensure an open dialogue during larger meetings, she does feel that at times it is harder for the women to speak up.

> "Over zoom, it can be hard to be heard. Unless the manager sees you 'raise your hand', you don't get to speak. And I don't want to interrupt and be rude."

This seemed to contradict the seemingly strong sense of consensus that the Japanese culture seems to focus on, especially when it comes to decision making. Some of this change in communication most likely comes from differences in behavioral and communication patterns over digital platforms like Zoom or Google Meets. It has been shown that women are often expected to remain in a less assertive state of mind than me, and act so accordingly[28], which is exacerbated by telework. As Ms. Takumi mentioned, speaking up over a video call is even more difficult as the Japanese face the problem of either coming off as critical and interruptive, or must resign themselves to conforming to a more reserved nature. Building on my own understanding of how Zoom and teleconferencing work, I believe that unless the manager or meeting moderator can see an individual on their screen, they may be less likely to be acknowledged or consulted for their opinion.

Women face additional challenges when it comes to teleworking because of the subsequent work-style shift and the greater pandemic have had on their home life. More specifically, because the COVID-19 pandemic has affected almost every aspect of life, Japanese working women not only must deal with the challenge of adapting to telework at home, but if they are mothers, they must also now handle having their children home as well. This was especially difficult at the beginning of the pandemic because since only about 10% of public

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28 Amanatullah, E. T., & Morris, M. W. 2010. Negotiating gender roles: Gender differences in assertive negotiating are mediated by women's fear of backlash and attenuated when negotiating on behalf of others. Journal of personality and social psychology, 98(2), 256.

schools provided some form of online education for students at the beginning of the pandemic[29], the responsibility of schooling or busying the children fell on the mothers. During one of my interviews, I talked with Mrs. Natsumi about her experience of having her children and husband home full-time. Mrs. Natsumi is a mother of two children, aged 4 and 6 years old, and works as an executive at a car manufacturing company. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, her children were home for 2 months due to their school being closed, and her husband was also teleworking in their small apartment. Mrs. Natsumi described that it was often difficult to find a quiet yet functional place in the apartment to join meetings or even to work. "If my husband was in a meeting, the children and I would have to be very quiet and stay out of his way."

For Japanese professionals, telework has also created a change in mentalities when it comes to happiness, satisfaction, work satisfaction and stress; and this change varies when looking at males and females. While it has been highlighted how women face new and differing challenges when it comes to gender roles and responsibilities (e.g. homemaking, caring for children, etc.), women have also mentally been affected by the shift to teleworking. Data from Kazekami (see Appendix 1) shows that while women feel less stress when it comes to work or their lives than men, women also feel "more stress from balancing work and domestic chores than males regardless of performing telework"[30]. This data shows is support for the idea that men and women are disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to telework, in addition to highlighting the idea that women have extra responsibilities outside of their professional life, i.e. being a wife and mother, which they are expected to fulfill to a great extent than men. As mentioned previously by interviewees, these responsibilities range from helping

29 nippon.com. 2020. "Digital Divide: Majority of Japanese Schools Offline During Coronavirus Shutdown," https://www.nippon.com/en/news/fnn2020062656524/.
30 Kazekami, S. 2020. Mechanisms to improve labor productivity by performing telework. Telecommunications Policy, 44(2). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.telpol.2019.101868

the children with schoolwork since many Japanese schools had difficulties integrating remote learning, maintaining order in the household when a video call is in progress, or household chores. While this paper's main focus is not gender disparities in Japan, it is interesting to note the combination of COVID-related and culture-related differences that professional, working females feel compared to males.

Cultural Connections

Collectivism vs. Individualism

This research has detailed many first-hand experiences from Japanese workers over the course of the pandemic during 2020. Historical and present cultural trends and observations will be utilized to aid in explaining the developments in Japanese business culture as explained by the interviewees. The primary cultural characteristic is the idea of cultural collectivism. In the context of the pandemic, the manifestation of this can come in many forms, ranging from abiding by social norms like mask-wearing and obeying social distancing rules, to withholding personal judgment or criticism of "the system" or authority. For example, in a panel discussion with approximately a dozen associates from the same consulting company, it was clear to see the collectivist nature of the individuals when asked why individuals wear masks out in public. Many of the answers fell along the lines of "because it is the rules" or "it helps keep others safe". No questions were asked to provoke a sense of discomfort or insight criticism, but I found it interesting that there seemed to be a silent sense of respect for authority, whether it be the government, medical professionals or employers.

This collectivist nature of Japan seems to also create an environment which allows for greater flexibility for the Japanese workforce to choose between telework and in person work.

Based on interviewees' responses, many individuals felt safe enough to return to work and begin using public transportation again because they felt safe enough to do so since those around them obeyed mask-wearing and social distancing laws and regulations. Though this social and cultural trend of courtesy and respect for others has been around for much longer than the pandemic. The most noticeable example from my past experiences in Japan has been the practice of wearing masks during times of flu or even during allergy season. While much of Japanese culture is considered to follow a collectivist nature, we will also consider how collectivism can equally be seen as a lack of individualism.

According to Hofstede, when it comes to individualism in a culture, especially in a business context, Japan scores significantly lower than other western countries when it comes to individualism[31]. What this means is that in a group or team context, Japanese individuals working in Japanese corporations will be more likely to work towards team balance and equilibrium. This however is often at the expense of voicing individual opinions or ideas. But, when it comes to expressing individualism, there are still those who are more willing to voice their opinions or stance concerning certain COVID-related protocols and policies. For example, the Japan Times reported in May 2020 that approximately 5% of Japanese do not wear masks[32]. While this rebellion against the mandate does echo that of "anti-maskers" in western countries like the United States, it is not as boldly flaunted. Even though individuals in corporate Japan do voice their concerns or objection to certain policies or mandates, it is often done so with hesitancy or a meek nature. Though I personally did not experience this behavioral trait from any

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31 Penn State. 2018. "Japan's View on Individualism, Culture, and Personal Relationships." https://sites.psu.edu/global/2018/11/04/4908/.

32 Vries, Paul De. May 22, 2020. "COVID-19 versus Japan's Culture of Collectivism." The Japan Times. https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2020/05/22/commentary/japan-commentary/covid-19-versus-japans-culture-collectivism/.

of the individuals I interviewed, whether that be in one-on-one interviews or group discussions. This may have been due to interviewees being less willing to speak out or provide more critical feedback or answers due to the interview being recorded. However, equally as likely is the possibility that those individuals I interviewed simply were of a more collectivist, or at least positive mindset in regards to COVID restrictions and the new Japanese business environment.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has created upheaval and unprecedented all over the world, and this paper focuses specifically on the upheaval and changes in Japanese business culture and operations. The biggest of these shifts, in analyzing both previous data and literature along with recent interview responses, appeared to be the hastened and near frantic switch to telework. This shift from in person work to remote working in and of itself created, or contributed to the worsening of, issues such as managers' expectations of employees, technological differences between generations, and even highlighted gender-specific difficulties within the Japanese corporate culture and workforce, namely gender inequality. Utilizing interview data describing the period in Japan between March 2020 and December 2020, this study is able to come to the conclusion that the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on how Japanese corporations acted and reacted during the pandemic, and also had mixed results when it came to the pandemic's effect on intercompany relationships and interactions, especially between managers and direct reports. Females seemed to have a more difficult time during the pandemic in 2020 as they had to navigate a new world of balancing work and home expectations and responsibilities, such as cooking meals, looking after children, and working on their own tasks for their occupation. Older generations, typically those corporate individuals above 50, had a harder time

adjusting to the technological leap that companies and much of corporate Japan had to take at the beginning of the pandemic, especially when it came to electronically signing documents and teleworking with minimal to no in person office interaction.

As mentioned earlier in the paper, the interviews and primary source data collected for this paper are meant to give insight into the larger and more complex environment of corporate Japan as corporations, and even individuals, navigate the unprecedented landscape of the pandemic. Because of the ever-developing nature of the pandemic, along with its relative newness, further studies would need to be conducted to determine the long-term implications and changes in Japan, especially as it relates to corporations, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequential shift to telework. This would allow for a better understanding of what changes, such as telework, were sustained and adopted for the long-term, namely once the pandemic subsides.

Appendix

Item 1:

Table 5
The effect of telework on stress, happiness, and satisfaction by order logit model using panel data.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Dependent variable =	Stress	Happiness	Life satisfaction	Work satisfaction
telework	−0.539**	−0.839***	−0.897***	−1.240***
	(0.235)	(0.277)	(0.281)	(0.257)
female	−0.522***	−0.726***	−0.710***	−0.340***
	(0.0665)	(0.0777)	(0.0784)	(0.0717)
telework × female	0.0679	0.122	0.0240	0.0988
	(0.524)	(0.622)	(0.630)	(0.572)
age	0.0340***	0.0250***	0.0223***	0.00613*
	(0.00308)	(0.00359)	(0.00362)	(0.00331)
job-change dummy	−0.230***	0.230***	0.285***	0.215***
	(0.0531)	(0.0607)	(0.0611)	(0.0568)
educational level	0.0322**	−0.0571***	−0.0745***	−0.0276*
	(0.0155)	(0.0180)	(0.0182)	(0.0167)
discretion to work	0.268***	−0.838***	−0.820***	−1.566***
	(0.0423)	(0.0472)	(0.0475)	(0.0463)
parental status	−0.359***	−1.099***	−0.897***	−0.233***
	(0.0567)	(0.0670)	(0.0673)	(0.0611)
year dummy (2018 = 1)	−0.0624**	−0.112***	−0.0211	−0.0170
	(0.0296)	(0.0315)	(0.0316)	(0.0307)
Observations	17,967	17,967	17,967	17,967
Number of pkey	9109	9109	9109	9109

Standard errors in parentheses.
***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1.
Telework = performing telework equals one, zero otherwise.
Stress (stressful = 1, stress-free = 5).
Happiness (very happy = 1, unhappy = 5).
Life satisfaction (very satisfied = 1, unsatisfied = 5).
Work Satisfaction (very satisfied = 1, unsatisfied = 5).
The discretion to work: well-suited and suited = 1, otherwise zero.
Job-change dummy equals one if an employee has changed her/his job more than once.
Parental status equals one if an employee has a child, otherwise zero.
Controlled by industry, occupation, and firm size.

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