

Japan's Suicidal Salarymen Are Dying for Work

By Sam Clements

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I recently took a trip to Brussels and met a Japanese woman on vacation in the hostel I was staying in. At 4 AM that morning, when I heard Sayaka—my new Japanese friend—quietly answer her phone and creep from her bed to the downstairs computer room, I was naturally interested in what she was up to. A mole, keeping tabs on guests for the hostel owners? A weirdo, relaying late-night messages about Brussels to her parents because she didn't feel comfortable using the internet in daylight?

No, turns out it was the only holiday she had taken that year and the early morning computer visit was to finish off some "urgent" work for her boss, which is a pretty sucky way to spend your vacation. Then again, it's still better than the 16-hour days at the office that awaited her at home.

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Sayaka's situation isn't uncommon. A large amount of the population in Japan's biggest cities have a destructive relationship with work, literally, with many grinding themselves away to an early grave. The social phenomenon has its own word, *karoshi*, and it isn't death from digit-crippling labor in a sweatshop or accidents on



a building site. It's suits in corporate buildings dying from strokes, heart attacks, or committing suicide after being worked to their limit.

Earlier this year, the suicide of 26-year-old Mina Mori was accepted as *karoshi* after an investigation found she'd been clocking up 140 hours of overtime every month, working at a popular chain restaurant called Watami. Employees for numerous companies are expected to embrace a work culture that's destroying their lives—a kind of worse version of the embrace through gritted-teeth I'd imagine David Miliband gave his brother when he got the party leader job—but a firm, necessary embrace nonetheless.

Karoshi was first recognized in the late 60s, when a guy in the shipping department of Japan's largest newspaper company died after having a stroke, which seemed kind of unusual for a 29-year-old, until people realized that radically overworking a human can have negative effects on the body, which somehow managed to be a surprise. Since then, cases have become relentless battles between family members of the deceased trying to prove their relatives died from being overworked, and the company in question trying their hardest to sweep it under the ever-lumpier rug.

Temporary workers make up around a third of the Japanese workforce, which means less pay and next to no employment rights—even if they've been with the company for years. Lifetime employment is a long-dead relic of the past, too. Jake Adelstein spent 12 years in Japan as the first ever non-Japanese reporter at the *Yomiuri Shinbun* newspaper—working painstakingly long days and nights, littered with just a few power-naps—and witnessed exactly how that statistic affects workers in a depressingly morbid way.

“One of the things that contributes to really crappy conditions in Japanese companies is the fact that you have all these temporary staffing agencies. If



someone is in the company for over five years, then they're supposed to be offered a full time position, but what happens is right around the time that five years is up, they get fired. This promise of lifetime employment or real employment is held out in front of them, then pulled away like a rug under their feet," he told me.

American journalist Jake Adelstein.

Because people need to eat food to stay alive and pay rent if they want to enjoy luxuries like not getting seriously ill from sleeping in the cold every night, this backdrop of job insecurity has been allowed to become the norm, with particularly exploitative companies—"Black Companies," as they're known—able to work their employees to ruin. In constant fear of suddenly being replaced, workers develop Blairite abilities to please, working insane overtime without pay and even forging their recorded working hours so the company stays out of trouble.

"When I was working at one company, we would keep two sets of books," Jake said. "We kept the set of books that we'd actually worked and the books we would turn into the Labour Standards Office. Part of your duty as a worker on the night shifts was basically forging everybody's working hours. You might have been working for a week with no vacation and you'd write down that, instead of working, you'd been on vacation for the last three days.

"There's a whole tradition of not logging in your overtime and to work without extra pay. It still depends on very traditional influences—there's still this idea that age comes first. It's still widely considered to be rude or impudent to leave before the senior person does."

Sleeping capsules—for those lucky enough to not be able to go home.



Obviously all of this time working leaves very little time to do all of the other things people need in their lives to not turn into miserable, convulsing, human IEDs, ready to explode at the slightest nudge. You know, stuff like socializing, spending time with their family, and getting more than two hours sleep a night. Those sleeping capsules you've seen on the internet for the last ten years are there purely because such a large amount of people thought it would make more sense to sleep in padded coffins stacked on top of each other than take the train home after working into the early hours of the morning every single day.

Jake explained: "The problem is the vicious circle you get into. You're living in the suburbs, your commute is long, you get into work on a crowded train and you're already tired because you've been standing up. Then you're at work until 11 or 12, you go home on the same crowded train, can't stay up and can't relax because you've got to be working the next day. So you're constantly sleep deprived and that just goes on and on.

"One of the reasons that Japan has such a lousy birth and marriage rate is because, if you're at the office all the time, you have no personal life. How can you possibly cultivate? How can you possibly meet someone and date them and have romance? Your personality ends up revolving around your work. Your work is your life, that's all that you are."

If you're not being subjected to such an intense work rate, slaving into sunrise and suffering from sleep deprivation, your colleagues and boss will bitch you out for not working hard enough, meaning it's sometimes just as important to keep up the appearance of an exhausted, broken wreck as doing the actual work itself.

As Jake told me, "If you haven't been working long hours, you give the appearance of someone who is working long hours and really suffering for it. That seems to have more value than actually getting something done. You always have to look



tired or appear tired, even if you're not. That way it looks like you've been doing a job."

The Complete Manual of Suicide.

Japan has one of the highest suicide rates in the world, so faux-weariness or not, it confirms that a huge amount of Japanese people are having a hugely shitty time, and a lot of it is because of work. In 2009, the total number of suicides rose two percent, to 32,845, which is basically 26 suicides every 100,000 people. And of the 2,207 work-related suicides in 2007, the most common reason was overwork. Although, I suppose when a country dubs an area of woodland "Suicide Forest" and sells a worrying quantity of a book titled *The Complete Manual of Suicide* every year, shocking statistics of people taking their own lives become much less of a shock.

"*The Complete Manual of Suicide*—which has forever been a best-seller in Japan—speaks to so many Japanese people," Jake told me. "It's been another lousy day at the office, work has piled up and you're way behind on your bills. You're not sleeping, you're tired and you have to get up at 6 AM and make that 90-minute trek to work. Then you're going to be at the office all night again—repeating that over and over. Wouldn't it be nice to go to sleep and never wake up again? You know, really sleep? You can see how that speaks to this mass of people whose entire lives are consumed by work."

While I was speaking to Sayaka in the hostel, I couldn't help but notice a glimmer of satisfaction when I showed outrage at her 16-hour working days, as if it was recognition of a job well done. That glimmer only confirmed that the line between the comradery and respect gained from working long hours lies dangerously thin between your body giving out or you giving out on your body after years of being overworked. Sayaka is young and there is evidence that employment rights are

slowly improving in Japan, so I hope—for her sake—that the process gathers momentum fast, otherwise her youthful, naive enthusiasm could easily be stretched to its limit.

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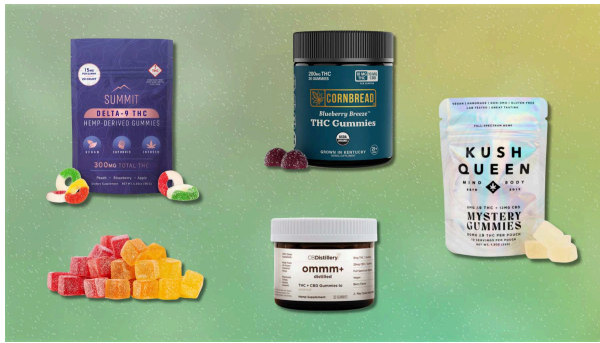
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