**過労死**

K a r o u s h i

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Introduction

A morbid issue within Japanese businesses is arousing concern in Japan’s citizens; this issue is of death by overworking, referred to as Karoushi. Karoushi is a specifically coined term used in Japan to explain the unexpected and sudden death of young, *healthy* Japanese businessmen and women who suffer from abrupt heart failure, high blood pressure, and other physical ailments which ultimately results in an untimely death. An analysis of the business lifestyle in Japan reveals a number of challenges faced by young men and women in the workforce that puts them at risk of Karoushi: feelings of job insecurity combined with high productivity demands and long hours, a lack of overtime prevention in the workforce, and a strong sense of group loyalty and self-sacrifice that results in neglected personal health.

Before discussing in depth what Karoushi is, first the issue of how it happens must be addressed by detailing the aspects of Japanese businesses; what conditions inside and outside the workforce contribute to Karoushi and why they happen. It is important to note that Japanese businesses have a distinct, rigid structure that creates an atmosphere where Karoushi can occur. First, Japanese people associate age with wisdom, and this idea is reflected strongly in businesses; younger people are hired to start at the bottom of the business ladder and work their way up as they age. Second, Japanese employees are assigned various kinds of jobs in different departments within the company, called jinjiidou, 人事異動, which means they are constantly moving and their jobs change frequently. Finally, the old system of permanent employment in Japan is dwindling more and more, and so job security is no longer guaranteed. Medical journalists Hiyama and Yoshihara point out Japanese corporate employees are like “worker bees”, individuals who have positions within groups and highly consider everyone in it when making decisions and performing tasks; work is done collectively, not individually. Not only that, but many Japanese workers recognize that they as people, as well as the work that they do, represent the company, and failure is unacceptable.

The the design of the Japanese corporate structure, however distinct it may be from most, is where the root of this social issue lies. In the late 1980’s when the “economic bubble” of Japan began inflating, people were overconfident with their spending which in turn made the economic crash around 1992 that much harder, especially for corporations and big businesses. Due to this, as well as the inclusion of the American economic downturn, which affected nations globally, the security of jobs in Japan was falling. Not only did the burst of the bubble economy cause an unsettling worry within employees, but the collapse set Japan back in terms of their technological edge overseas and almost eliminated them as competition in the global market. All of this factors made at least two things clear in regards to the underlying causes of Karoushi: one, people were afraid to lose their jobs, causing them to work harder, for longer and often for less, and two, the decreased competition caused on insurge for demand to get back on top. Corporate bosses, the heavy heads of business, were demanding more from employees in order to bring Japanese business up, to improve sales, increase productivity, and so forth. Due to the increased demand for products, the increase in working hours and in overtime, combined with the stress of a high demand job and the uncertainty of employment, these rigid structures and requirements negatively impact employees and set in motion the health problems that lead to Karoushi.

The issue of long hours, excessive overtime, and a lack of overtime prevention programs within companies are also associated with the cause of Karoushi. The Ministry of Heatlh, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) in Japan conducted statistics from 2002 to 2005, the period in which America’s economy was faltering, that illustrated the amount of work Japanese businesspeople were doing. The statistics showed that the majority of workers, over 6 million people, worked 60 or more hours per week. Simultaneously, approximately three hundred cases of brain and heart diseases were “recognized as labour accidents resulting from overworking,” (Kanai) Annual labor studies in Japan produced the following statistics in Tokyo: only 46.9% of workers in Japan received their overtime in full in 2011, which is 8.9% lower than the findings from the year before. This means that people are either not recording their overtime at work, or taking their work home with them at the end of the day; all of this in addition to the fact that many corporate bosses are not regulating overtime in as strict a fashion as it seems necessary. Some people, as well as myself, feel that it is the job of the employed to regulate and document their hours appropriately, however I personally feel that it is almost a fear that keeps some from doing it. No one wants to be late on a quota, to need extra time to complete a task, and admitting to taking that extra time may lead to consequences.

Virginia Tech Professor Richard Wokutch points out that many of the cases of Karoushi depend on the work being done, and this is especially true for assembly-type jobs, and found that “cumulative trauma disorders...[are the] result of the fast pace and repetitive tasks of the assembly line.” In assembly jobs, as well as corporate positions, Japanese workers are given little room for personal growth, and are given either the same, repetitive tasks or are moved from place to place within the company, jinjiidou, which ideally are meant to improve their overall abilities, but gives them little time to adjust to new settings and complete ever increasing tasks. The inconsistencies within the company may be for the benefit of productivity, for business, and even to improve the abilities of the employed to make them more diverse, but in the end it seems to be harming them more than helping them. Wokutch also says the reason so few employees actually complain about being tired, stressed, or overworked is because, “the Japanese may be more accustomed to working with pain...There is a sense that it is dishonorable to complain." I feel that this is only partly true, because it holds a traditional stigma that the Japanese are honor bound like the samurai of history, willing to give their lives for their cause, in this case their company; I do not agree with this. Yes I believe that the Japanese have a strong sense of accomplishment, wanting their company to be the best it can be, wanting themselves to be the best they can be. I do agree with the idea that they may think it is dishonorable to complain, but more that it may be a burden to others and they so highly consider their peers and bosses that this troublesome occurrence is best ignored and overlooked for the benefit of everyone, aside from the complainant.

The health problems leading up to Karoushi are quite disturbing, especially given the circumstances of their occurrences; as stated previously, Karoushi is so unusual because it happens to young, healthy adults with no previous history of illness or disorders. Atsuko Kanai lists only some of the medical problems that lead up to Karoushi in her study of the phenomena, “[Karoushi is] a condition of being permanently unable to work or dead due to acutely attacking ischemic heart disease such as myocardial infraction, or acute heart failure caused by cerebral vascular diseases such as cerebral hemorrhage, subarachnoid hemorrhage and cerebral infraction,”; problems that are caused by the deterioration of hypertension and arteriosclerosis due to excessive work practices. Karoushi is not the result of simply physical exhaustion and medical problems, but also from mental disorders, such as anxiety, depression, insomnia, and suicidal tendencies. People become worn down physically as well as mentally, and the combined stress of factors inside as well as outside work life could lead to the occurrence of Karoushi. From Virginia Tech, Sookhan Ho writes, “...Karoushi results not only from work conditions such as a fast work pace or long hours, but also from other, indirect factors, such as long commutes, cramped living spaces, and inadequate sleep and exercise.” In fact there could be many factors that lead to Karoushi in the workforce, but it is difficult to clearly identify if a person’s unexpected death is due to work or other outside factors entirely. For this reason, there have only been a handful of court claims by families in Japan who seek justice from the companies supposedly at fault for this occurrence; however, many people are afraid to go against such large businesses, and are even embarrassed that such a thing could happen to someone in there family.

Conclusion

Karoushi is what happens when there are conflicts between health, safety, work-life balance, and productivity; all factors weighing heavily on Japanese businesses today, especially after the burst of the "bubble economy" which greatly affected Japanese corporations and their workers. From *Occupational Environmental Medicine,* authors Hiyama and Yoshihara write, “Overwork can kill if combined with high demand, low control, and poor social support,” and these are all factors commonly found within corporations in Japan.

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