

NEWS LESSON

Why Leaving on Time Can Feel Disloyal

BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. Would you leave work on time if your manager stayed late?
2. What makes someone look busy without getting much done?
3. Would you prefer a shorter day or more freedom over your hours?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**devastating**	☐	A	causing very great damage or shock
2	**prominent**	☐	B	a feeling of strain between two opposing things
3	**recruit**	☐	C	losing interest and effort in your work
4	**revealing**	☐	D	showing something that was not clear before
5	**dilemma**	☐	E	extreme tiredness
6	**fatigue**	☐	F	well known and important
7	**disengagement**	☐	G	a difficult choice between two things
8	**tension**	☐	H	to find new people to join a company

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

A shrinking workforce is testing reforms designed to separate professional commitment from physical presence.

1 At the end of the working day, the decisive fact may not be whether the work is finished but whether the manager has stood up. An employee who leaves first risks appearing less committed; one who remains can display loyalty without producing anything useful. That tension sits at the heart of Japan's long struggle with office culture. Physical presence has often functioned as a visible measure of dedication, even when it becomes a poor measure of achievement.

2 The consequences have sometimes been devastating. Japan's term "karoshi", death from overwork, reflects a history of workloads associated with serious illness and suicide. Public campaigning, prominent cases and legislative reform have made the issue impossible to dismiss. The labour ministry's October 2026 white paper continued to examine compensation claims, mental-health risks and prevention. Progress is evident, but workplace expectations can survive long after official policy changes.

3 What makes the current debate particularly revealing is the pressure coming from the opposite direction. Japan's ageing population and shrinking pool of working-age people have left businesses struggling to recruit. Employers have pressed for greater flexibility, arguing that employees who wish to earn more should have opportunities to work additional hours. From September 2026, the labour ministry stopped universally urging businesses to adhere to a recommended 45-hour monthly overtime ceiling. This was a change in guidance, not a wholesale abolition of statutory overtime protections, yet it prompted fears that hard-won reforms could be diluted.

4 The argument is sometimes presented as a simple choice between economic growth and workers' well-being. In practice, the relationship is much more complicated. Someone who wants extra shifts to improve their income may regard tighter restrictions as frustrating. Another employee, anxious about promotion or worried about letting colleagues down, may experience the same supposed freedom as pressure. In a labour ministry survey reported in March, 30% of respondents wanted fewer hours, compared with 10.5% who wanted to work more. Those figures complicate the claim that workers broadly welcome a longer working week.

5 Meanwhile, other aspects of Japanese working life are changing. The tradition of after-hours socialising with colleagues has weakened in some workplaces, and flexible schedules are gaining visibility. Tokyo's metropolitan administration has offered eligible employees a four-day week option, while some businesses are loosening rigid expectations around appearance and office conduct. These developments are uneven, and a four-day schedule does not necessarily mean a four-day workload. Still, they point towards a different understanding of professional commitment, one that leaves room for family responsibilities and a life outside employment.

6 Japan's dilemma is not unique. Ageing societies must find ways to sustain public services and economic activity without exhausting the people who deliver them. Asking workers to spend longer at their desks may appear to offer a quick answer, but fatigue, illness and disengagement carry costs of their own. A better workplace would make extra hours genuinely voluntary and reward the work done. People should be able to do a good job and still have time and energy for the rest of their lives.

Sources: Japan Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. The labour ministry's 2026 change removed the legal ceiling on overtime. T F NG
2. The survey found nearly three times as many workers wanting fewer hours as wanting more. T F NG
3. The text suggests that a four-day week always reduces an employee's workload. T F NG
4. The labour ministry plans to restore the 45-hour recommendation next year. T F NG
5. The text suggests that one overtime policy can feel like freedom to one employee and pressure to another. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

adhere	ceiling	diluted	lenient	statutory	sustain	voluntary	wholesale

1. Campaigners warned that the reforms would be _____ by so many exemptions that they would achieve very little.
2. Employers who breach their _____ duties, such as paying the minimum wage, can be fined.
3. The minister ruled out a _____ rewriting of the labour code and preferred targeted amendments.
4. Firms that fail to _____ to the guidance risk a visit from inspectors.
5. Under the agreement, overtime is capped at a monthly _____ of forty-five hours.
6. Without more workers, the country may be unable to _____ its pension system for decades.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. Campaigners have called for greater _____ about how overtime is recorded. (TRANSPARENT)
2. The reform met with fierce _____ from managers who feared losing control. (RESIST)
3. Offering extra shifts becomes _____ if workers feel unable to decline them. (PROBLEM)
4. Critics described the change as a deeply _____ move. (CONTROVERSY)
5. There is little _____ of the labour shortage easing soon. (LIKELY)

7 Language focus: prepositions

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Formal phrases like these are fixed chunks. Learn the whole phrase, not the preposition alone.

at	by	in	of	on	to	with

1. Forcing staff to stay late is tantamount _____ demanding unpaid work.
2. The plan to extend working hours is fraught _____ legal risk.
3. Any pay rise is contingent _____ productivity targets being met.
4. Some firms offer extra leave in lieu _____ overtime pay.
5. Years of public pressure culminated _____ a change in the law.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. What should a workplace reward besides time at a desk?
2. Would you enjoy after-work events if everyone expected you to attend?
3. What would make leaving on time feel normal?

9 Role-play: can I leave on time?

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the manager

Your employee wants to leave at five every day. The team is busy and you often stay late yourself. Ask at least two questions before you decide. You can say yes, no, or yes with a condition.

Student B · the employee

You finish your work by five, but nobody leaves before the manager. Ask to leave on time. Explain why it matters to you and how you will keep the work up to date.

Useful phrases

I was hoping to leave at five every day.
I've finished everything on my list.
Are you worried about how it looks?
I'd be happy to try it for a month.
I'm afraid we can't, because we're short of staff.
Could we find a compromise?

Afterwards, tell the class: did the manager say yes, and was it a fair decision?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 A · 2 F · 3 H · 4 D · 5 G · 6 E · 7 C · 8 B

4 True, false or not given

1 F · 2 T · 3 F · 4 NG · 5 T

5 Vocabulary

1 diluted · 2 statutory · 3 wholesale · 4 adhere · 5 ceiling · 6 sustain

6 Word forms

1 transparency · 2 resistance · 3 problematic · 4 controversial · 5 likelihood

7 Language focus

1 to · 2 with · 3 on · 4 of · 5 in

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