NEWS LESSON

Why Some Japanese Workers Still Cannot Leave on Time



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	**reforms**	☐	A	people who say what is wrong with something
2	**compensation**	☐	B	becoming older, with more old people than before
3	**critics**	☐	C	how much work is done in a certain time
4	**productivity**	☐	D	working in an organised way to change something
5	**recommended**	☐	E	less strict and less formal
6	**relaxed**	☐	F	money paid to someone for harm or loss
7	**ageing**	☐	G	official changes made to improve a system
8	**campaigning**	☐	H	suggested as the best or right amount

3 Read

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

The tasks are finished and the train is due, but the manager has not moved. Legal limits on overtime cannot easily change what a room expects.

1 The official working day is over, but nobody moves. One employee has finished every task and wants to clock off in time for the train home; the manager is still at the desk. Leaving first should be an ordinary decision, yet in some Japanese workplaces it can feel like a public statement about loyalty. That small moment helps explain why office reform is not only about legal limits. It is also about the pressure people read in the room.

2 The dangers are real enough to have produced a specific word: "karoshi", death caused by excessive work. Campaigning and high-profile cases have led to reforms intended to reduce overtime, encourage annual leave and recognise the damage caused by workplace stress. In October 2026, the labour ministry's latest white paper again examined compensation claims and prevention. Its continuing existence shows that written rules have not removed the problem.

3 Now the debate is moving in a complicated direction. Japan has an ageing population and a severe labour shortage in sectors ranging from care services to manufacturing. Some employers want more flexibility to offer additional hours to people who choose to work them. From September 2026, the government stopped universally urging companies to hold overtime to a recommended 45 hours a month. Existing legal protections were not simply abolished, but critics feared that weakening the message could make it harder for employees to refuse extra work.

4 Survey results suggest that workers themselves are divided. A labour ministry survey was reported in March 2026. Of the workers who answered, 30% wanted shorter hours and around one in ten wanted longer ones. Most were satisfied with their current schedule. That hardly amounts to an overwhelming demand for a return to late nights at the office. There is also a difference between willingly working extra hours for better pay and feeling that your career depends on never saying no.

5 Japan's changing social habits offer another clue. Traditional after-work drinking sessions are becoming less central for some younger employees, while businesses increasingly experiment with flexible arrangements and more relaxed rules. Tokyo's metropolitan government has offered a four-day working-week option to eligible staff, though it is not a national requirement. Such changes suggest a growing recognition that caring responsibilities, personal interests and rest deserve space alongside professional ambition.

6 The challenge is that Japan cannot solve its labour shortage simply by telling people to work harder. Greater productivity, better technology and workplaces that attract people who might otherwise drop out of the labour market all have a role. Ultimately, the most meaningful change may be cultural: creating offices where leaving on time is normal rather than something an employee feels compelled to explain.

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. In September 2026 Japan removed all legal limits on overtime. T F NG
2. Fewer than half of the surveyed workers wanted to change their hours. T F NG
3. The labour shortage affects only the care sector. T F NG
4. The survey was carried out in Tokyo. T F NG
5. Tokyo's government has made a four-day week compulsory for every company in Japan. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

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

abolished	ambition	compulsory	demanding	flexibility	satisfied	severe	urging

1. The tax was completely _____ last year, so nobody pays it any more.
2. The region has a _____ shortage of doctors, and some clinics have closed.
3. She has great professional _____ and hopes to run the company one day.
4. The union keeps _____ firms to pay overtime fairly.
5. Many parents ask for _____ in their hours so they can collect their children from school.
6. Most of the staff said they were _____ with their new working hours.

6 Verb forms

Write the correct form of the verb in brackets.

1. By the time the manager finally stood up, the employee _____ at her desk for two hours. (SIT)
2. A four-day week _____ to city staff since April. (OFFER)
3. By the time the survey was reported in March, all the data _____ . (COLLECT)
4. She would have left at five if her manager _____ the office earlier. (LEAVE)
5. Many employees avoid _____ before their manager does. (LEAVE)

7 Language focus: prepositions

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Learn each verb or adjective with its preposition as one chunk, and check it in a dictionary.

by for from of on to with

1. Managers should be held accountable _____ the health of their teams.
2. The union objected _____ the proposal to extend working hours.
3. Many firms are struggling to cope _____ the shortage of staff.
4. Young workers often insist _____ a clear separation between work and home.
5. Some managers are suspicious _____ staff who leave early.

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

4 True, false or not given

1 F · 2 T · 3 F · 4 NG · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 abolished · 2 severe · 3 ambition · 4 urging · 5 flexibility · 6 satisfied

6 Verb forms

1 had been sitting or had sat · 2 has been offered · 3 had been collected · 4 had left · 5 leaving

7 Language focus

1 for · 2 to · 3 with · 4 on · 5 of

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