

Editorial

Remote work and well-being in the post-COVID-19 era

The COVID-19 pandemic has considerably affected people's lives worldwide. For example, although Japan's unemployment rate did not remarkably rise during the pandemic, the number of employed individuals not at work temporarily increased, peaking in April 2020. The expansion of remote work was a characteristic phenomenon of the pandemic. The implementation rate of remote work increased remarkably in April 2020, when the national government declared its first state of emergency in response to the pandemic's first wave; however, remote work was often not continued after that declaration was lifted^{1–3}). Furthermore, not everyone switched to remote work during the pandemic, and there were disparities in remote work rates depending on the industry, occupation, company size, and region of residence^{2, 3}).

Therefore, methods to evaluate such work style changes regarding people's well-being became essential. Under the spread of infection, reducing commuting via remote work could be positively evaluated for people's health as contributing to a reduced risk of infection. Furthermore, well-being can be assessed in terms of health and diverse aspects, such as daily time use, quality of work, and subjective well-being⁴). From this perspective, we offer a few thoughts on the following.

First, we examine how remote work could be evaluated regarding its impact on people's time use and work-life balance. Concerning the time allocation in daily life, changes in housework/childcare, and leisure hours during the pandemic were confirmed in several studies^{5–7}). Some studies noted the increased burden of housework/childcare for women⁵); however, other studies indicated increased involvement in housework and childcare among men who work remotely^{6, 7}). Time constraints are one of the primary reasons why Japanese men are less likely to share housework and childcare responsibilities; therefore, this change can be positively evaluated for work-life balance. The heavy workload inherent in remote work should be avoided to balance work and life. As suggested before the pandemic, the temporal boundaries between work and nonwork can quickly become blurred in remote work,

leading to overworking where work interferes with the sphere of daily life⁸). Evidence shows that remote work during the pandemic increased life satisfaction, but not when working longer hours⁷).

Next, we investigate how remote work might be evaluated in terms of quality of work. During the pandemic, the application of remote work resulted in reduced productivity due to inadequate remote work set-ups and communication difficulties⁹). Furthermore, the reduction in face-to-face communication with supervisors and colleagues through remote work generally leads to isolation and loneliness among employees. It has been speculated that the psychological impacts of remote work, such as satisfaction and anxiety, are not uniform and may vary depending on workers' personality characteristics. An empirical study showed that changes in work style due to remote work reduce job satisfaction for workers who value close relationships with others, such as socializing and intimacy¹⁰). Conversely, remote work could bring psychological benefits to those who prefer to work independently or are prone to interpersonal stress. The Japanese workplace has been described as a collectivist environment that requires teamwork; workers with certain personality traits have tended to achieve occupational success in such work environments¹¹). However, with the changes in the working environment due to remote work, the advantage/disadvantage of such personality traits may change if the conventional teamwork element becomes less critical as remote work becomes a normal way of working. The pandemic triggered irreversible changes in global norms; therefore, the workplace, work style, and psychological rewards need to be explored in terms of the quality of work.

We must ask if workers want to continue working remotely in the post-COVID-19 era. A survey in June 2021 determined that about 40% of respondents wanted to continue remote work even after the pandemic; conversely, about 56% of respondents wanted to work in the office¹²). These findings indicate a clear division between those who prefer remote work and those who do not. To promote remote work in the post-COVID-19 era, companies and

managers must address many factors¹³⁾. In addition to performance management to increase productivity and working hour management to prevent overwork, from the perspective of well-being, it becomes increasingly important to pay attention to individual workers' family lives, physical/mental health, and psychological aspects, such as job satisfaction and working style preferences.

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