

# Editorial

## Work to live, to die, or to be happy?

*Happiness is the meaning and the purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence.*

- Aristotle

*If the government cannot create happiness for its people, then there is no purpose for government to exist.*

- Legal code of Bhutan (1729)

*Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross Domestic Product.*

- His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck,  
the Fourth King of Bhutan

Although the concept of “happiness” has existed for centuries as quoted above, it is not until recently that “happiness at work” has gained attention in occupational health. Nowadays, convincing evidence supports that happier people live longer<sup>1)</sup>, healthier<sup>2)</sup>, be more productive<sup>3)</sup>, and are relatively more successful in their careers<sup>4)</sup>. We can thus view employees’ happiness as one of the major sources of positive outcomes in the workplace.

Corresponding to these facts, World Happiness Report was first published in April 2012 in support of the meeting by the United Nations on happiness and well-being, chaired by the Prime Minister of Bhutan<sup>5)</sup>. Based on this report, Japan has ranked the 53<sup>rd</sup> happiest country in 2016 among 157 countries, down from 46<sup>th</sup> in 2015, 43<sup>rd</sup> in 2013, and 40<sup>th</sup> in 2012. What makes Japan sitting in this ranking? We all acknowledge that Japan has prospered through rapid economic growth during the period of 20 years between 1950 and 1970. And even now, we still hold the world’s third largest economy. Indeed, there must be good reasons to explain this paradox.

### Why Japanese Workers Seems to be Unhappy?

As an occupational epidemiologist myself, I would like to discuss several reasons for being not so happy in Japanese workers based on time use and also propose a hint to overcome such situation. First, Japanese people are notorious for being one of the poorest sleepers in the world. We are ranked the second shortest sleep country among 29

countries surveyed<sup>6)</sup>. French, who slept the most, spend on an average of 8 hours and 50 minutes a day while Japanese spend 7 hours and 50 minutes. Japanese people wake up early as 7:00 AM in the morning but go to bed at 11:30 PM<sup>7)</sup>. Based on the NHK national time use survey initiated in 1970, sleeping time for Japanese people keeps decreasing by 75 seconds every year. The survey on state of employees’ health by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare in 2013 uncovered that 46.5% of workers are sleeping less than 6 hours on a workday. The prospective UK million women study revealed that sleeping less than 7 hours (as compared to 7 hours) was the second strongest factor reducing happiness next to physical disabilities<sup>8)</sup>. Poor sleep can not only be a source of irritability and stress, but also unhappiness as well.

Second, Japanese are working too long. OECD data suggests that average annual hours worked among Japanese was ranked the 21<sup>st</sup> (1,729 hours in 2014) among 38 countries but the statistic include not only those working under full-time condition but also part-time and part-year condition which is increasing rapidly in the Japanese society. Counting non-full-time condition contribute to reduce average annual hours worked. Scientific evidence suggest that long working hours is a major contributor for reducing resting time and sleep<sup>9)</sup>.

Third, because of both poor sleep and long working hours, work-life balance is largely unbalanced. Besides this, combination of long working hours with poor sleep may develop poor mental health<sup>10)</sup> and even increase the chance of committing suicides (Karo-jisatsu) and death from overwork (Karoshi)<sup>11)</sup>. What we should focus on is to balance between work, sleep/resting, and leisure time, and creating meaningful and challenging work. We also need to reduce working condition such as unusual work time, holiday work, unpaid work as well as eliminating wasting time on pointless paperwork and irrelevant procedures.

It is high time for Japanese society to think about how we work and what we work for. A paper evaluating the difference of work styles and meaning of work between Europeans and Americans phrased that “Europeans work to live and Americans live to work<sup>12)</sup>.” There is no right or wrong answer to this question of which attitude is bet-

ter or more appropriate, but rephrasing this word would be possible by adding the Japanese style: “Europeans work to live, Americans live to work, and Japanese work to die.” I am certainly sure that “work to die” is a wrong answer. At the same time, I would like to call for research to design happy workplaces.

## References

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