

Karaoke office: Japan inc. shifts to unusual workspaces

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Tiny one-person cubicles in underground stations, camping tents under towering skyscrapers and even karaoke clubs are popping up as alternative workspaces all over Japan

From tiny one-person cubicles in underground stations to camping tents

under towering skyscrapers and even karaoke clubs: in workaholic Japan, salarymen are never short of a place to work.

Unusual work venues are popping up all over Japan as firms try to move from chaining their employees to their desks towards offering staff more freedom in their working practices and as the gig economy spreads even to this temple of corporate culture.

On the pavement in Tokyo's Marunouchi financial district, groups of businesspeople clutching laptops sit on pillows around a low table... in a camping tent surrounded by shimmering glass buildings.

These temporary "outdoor offices" created by Snow Peak Business Solutions are also available in riverside parks in Tokyo suburbs and are proving a hit with firms keen to get staff out of the stuffy [office](#).

Yasuyuki Minami, who works for the Japanese arm of software giant SAP, said the unusual surroundings sparked "new business ideas" in their meeting held in the shade of the tent under the blazing sun.

His boss Tsutomu Ushida, an SAP Japan vice-president, agreed. "We tend to have fixed and stereotyped ideas when we are in the office. This was a good experience of working in the open air—something we don't experience every day."

Ryo Murase, the head of the company promoting these open offices, said people enjoyed working "under the sunshine and feeling a gentle breeze".



Some stations on Tokyo's metro now boast office cubicles equipped with desk, chair, computer display and wifi

"We live in a world where AI and robots are taking over. I believe we humans should do something more emotional, inspiring, compassionate and exciting," he told AFP.

'Very convenient'

Still inside but a long way from a conventional office is the teleworking karaoke room offered by Japan's biggest karaoke operator.

Daiichikosho started the new service in April last year and now opens up

its singing rooms for office space at 33 outlets close to business districts in big cities.

For 600 yen per hour (\$5.30), users can display images directly from their laptop computers onto the big screen on the wall usually used by karaoke singers for lyrics.

Shy public speakers can also practice business presentations using the karaoke microphone and a white board—all in a soundproof room.

Hideyuki Aoki, an employee at NTT Communications, uses the service several times a week while he is on the road.



For 600 yen per hour (\$5.30), users can practice their business presentations in a

karaoke room complete with microphone and white board

"At first, I felt uncomfortable but once I used the room, I found it very convenient," Aoki said.

"Now I'm using it as my business hub."

Takayuki Suzuki, from Daiichikoshō, says many travelling businesspeople or freelancers use cafes for work but are worried about opening sensitive documents with others around.

"You can have your own enclosed space at a karaoke club, so you can work without worrying about information leaking or people peaking onto your desk," said Suzuki.

'Trend of the times'

Also catering for teleworking professionals, Fuji Xerox and the Tokyo Metro system have installed "satellite offices" in major subway stations around the Japanese capital.

The black-and-white cubicles are equipped with a desk and a chair as well as a computer display and wifi and can be reserved online for 200 yen per 15 minutes.



Experts say a shrinking labour force and ageing population will increasingly force companies to shake up their working practices and offer hard-pressed staff more flexibility in where they work

Unlike in many major cities, commuters in super-polite Japan rarely use their mobile phones to avoid disturbing others and the cubicle offers an opportunity to make a business call without hesitation.

"The conventional office space will not disappear, but we want to get rid of space barriers and improve the diversity of working practices," said Yasutaro Tanno, an official at Fuji Xerox, at a cubicle set up at Tameike-Sanno station in downtown Tokyo.

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increasingly force companies to shake up their working practices and offer hard-pressed staff more flexibility in where they work.

Furthermore, freelancing, which has been popular in the United States and other developed nations for some time, is gradually spreading in Japan as the nation's corporate culture with its job for life and seniority system falls into decline.

The number of freelancers in Japan, including those who work a second job, was estimated to have reached 11.2 million this year, up from 9.1 million in 2015, according to IT and staffing agent Lancers.

Offering different places for both independent contractors and employees to work in is "a trend of the times," said Kentaro Arita, senior economist at Mizuho Research Institute.

"The working environment will increasingly change as working practices evolve," he added.

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