

Premium Friday campaign kicks off in effort to boost consumer spending

Starting Friday, many workers in Japan, notorious for its culture of overwork, will have a chance to start the weekend early, albeit once a month, for a trip to an onsen (hot springs), a shopping spree or simply dining out with family and friends.

The Premium Friday campaign, launched by the government and business lobby Keidanren, calls on workers to leave the office at around 3 p.m. on the last Friday of each month.

Aimed at boosting consumption and curbing long working hours, businesses are hoping to cash in on the move, offering a variety of new services and products.

With high expectations that a longer weekend will encourage people to travel, Japan's largest airline, All Nippon Airways Co., is offering 1,000 people up to a ¥10,000 discount for domestic flights scheduled to depart on Friday with further promotions planned.

“We hope this will encourage people to rest and to leave the office earlier,” said an ANA spokeswoman. “Participation by the government and companies is needed to push forward reforms (in the working culture).”

East Japan Railway Co. is offering a trip to Tochigi, Nagano, Fukushima or Miyagi prefectures on luxury Gran Class shinkansen trains, hoping to reinvigorate regional communities and promote local delicacies.

If a weekend trip is not an option, a short ride in a limousine with a glass of strawberry-dipped champagne around Tokyo's Nihonbashi and Marunouchi districts may be an alternative. Restaurants in the area are also planning to offer special meals as part of the promotion.

Amazon Japan, meanwhile, has been offering some 500,000 products that users can enjoy during their time off — a little bit of lavishness for the day. The company is also offering access to three Japanese drama series on the Amazon Prime video-streaming service for three days from Friday for nonsubscribers.

Mizuho Research Institute estimates that the initiative could have an economic impact of about ¥500 billion to ¥600 billion if more firms joined the campaign. If not, the business impact is likely to hover around ¥200 billion to ¥300 billion, it said, adding that the travel and restaurant industries are most likely to benefit from Premium Friday.

According to the government-affiliated Premium Friday Campaign Council, 76.4 percent of some 1,600 firms and organizations were willing to join the move. As of Wednesday, 2,342 had applied to use the official logo promoting the campaign, it said.

But a survey conducted by market research firm Intage Inc. showed that only 2.5 percent of the respondents said their company will be introducing Premium Friday in February.

Economists are also skeptical of the rosy picture the government and businesses are trying to paint.

Takayuki Miyajima, a senior economist at Mizuho Research Institute, said despite the number of companies that have signed up, a vast majority are taking a wait-and-see approach to how Premium Friday unfolds.

“It’s not a campaign all firms will join right away,” he said by phone earlier this week, adding that more companies may join after about six months.

“It requires various arrangements, the introduction of new systems (to regulate working hours) and changes in the working environment.”

And without those changes, workers won’t be able to leave the office early, said Miyajima.

Economic commentator Hajime Yamazaki agreed, saying it would simply result in a change in consumer spending habits instead of boosting the economy.

“If people start spending money on Fridays, they’ll stop using it on other days,” he said.

And if workers spend more shopping on Premium Friday, they will spend less in other sectors, he said.

Yamazaki warned that the campaign could also result in an additional burden on employees on other days of the week, adding that stricter regulations capping working hours should be introduced at the same time.

Other labor reforms that should be adopted include enabling employers to dismiss workers, and to allow workers to earn money on the side to ensure a productive and balanced approach to work, Yamazaki said.

If Japan is really serious about reinvigorating the economy, the best way is to delay the consumption tax hike to 10 percent slated for October 2019, he said.

Premium Friday “is not something the government should be focusing on,” said Yamazaki.