

Karaoke clubs and camping tents: Japan Inc.'s drive to diversify work environments

From tiny one-person cubicles in underground stations to camping tents under towering skyscrapers and even offices in karaoke clubs: In workaholic Japan, salarymen are never short of a place to work.

Unusual work venues are popping up all over the country as firms try to move from chaining their employees to their desks to offering staff more freedom in their working practices 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 stereotypical 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”.

“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 said.

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

Daiichikosho started the new service in April last year and now opens up its singing rooms as office space at 33 outlets close to business districts in big cities.

For ¥600 per hour, users can display images directly from their laptops onto the big screen on the wall usually used to show song 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.

“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 Daiichikosho, says many traveling businesspeople or free-lancers 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 peeking at your desk,” said Suzuki.

Also catering to teleworking professionals are the “satellite offices” installed by Fuji Xerox and the Tokyo Metro system in major subway stations around the capital.

The black-and-white cubicles are equipped with a desk and a chair as well as a computer display, and Wi-Fi can be reserved for ¥200 per 15 minutes.

Unlike in many major world cities, commuters in Tokyo rarely use their mobile phones to avoid disturbing others, and the cubicle offers an opportunity to make a business call without distraction.

“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.

Experts say a shrinking labor force and aging population will 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 as the nation’s corporate culture — with its job for life and seniority system — falls into decline.

The number of freelancers, 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.