

Karaoke office

Japan inc. shifts to unusual workspaces

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

AFP | Tokyo, 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".

"We live in a world where



Company employees working inside camping tents erected on the lawn outside an office building in Tokyo



The unusual surrounding sparked new biz ideas

YSUYUKI MINAMI, WHO WORKS FOR THE JAPANESE ARM OF SOFTWARE GIANT

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.

Daiichikoshō 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.

"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.

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.

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.

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.



A Fuji Xerox employee (bottom) working in a cubicle installed at a subway station in Tokyo.

Royals Harry and Meghan go barefoot on Bondi

AFP | Sydney, Australia

British royals Harry and Meghan kicked off their shoes and donned tropical garlands yesterday as they hit Sydney's famed Bondi beach for the latest stop on their Australian tour.

Expectant Meghan put on a summer dress and set aside her high heels, while Harry ditched his usual suit for chinos as the couple lapped up cheers from Australian fans and enjoyed Bondi's surf.

Despite morning fog, the pair met local surfers enjoying winter swells and sat down on the sand for a long chat with leaders of the OneWave group, which focuses on helping people improve mental health by getting outdoors.

Signs screaming "G'day Harry and Meghan" greeted the royal couple, who have received a warm welcome from fans throughout the start of their 16-day Pacific tour.

"You hear people that met the Queen when she came here



Britain's Prince Harry and his wife Meghan, Duchess of Sussex join a circle during a "Fluro Friday" session run by OneWave, a local surfing community group who raise awareness for mental health and wellbeing, at Sydney's iconic Bondi Beach

(in 1954)" said 26-year-old fan Christopher Cundle, "and they are still talking about it now."

"I can easily see that that is one of the things I will be talking to my grandkids and future gen-

erations about. It was awesome."

While half of Australians oppose having British monarchs as head of state, and the vast majority of citizens have carried on with business as usual during

the visit, there has been sizable support for the celebrity couple at every stop.

News that the Duchess of Sussex is pregnant has only made the crowds swell.



I actually think it is amazing that she actually got to meet Harry and fall in love with him

11-YEAR-OLD SCHOOLGIRL MYA

love," the Australian Republican Movement is putting on a brave face.

"The Duke and Duchess of Sussex are very welcome visitors" the group said at the start of the trip, pointedly adding that "Australians of all ages know the difference between this wonderful event and the questions of our nation's identity and future."

In a 1999 referendum, 55 percent of Australians voted against replacing Queen Elizabeth II as head of state, although polls indicate support for republicanism has grown since then.

The opposition Labor party has promised a plebiscite on the issue if it wins a general election expected in 2019.

Later on Friday the prince strapped on a harness and scaled the Sydney Harbour Bridge to hoist a flag of the Invictus Games, a sports championship for wounded military personnel.

On Monday the pair will go to Queensland's Fraser Island, the world's largest sand island, before jetting off to Fiji, Tonga and New Zealand.