How Has Workcation Evolved in Japan?

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Abstract: The workcation, wherein people combine work with vacation, is a concept that originated in the United States and Europe with the spread of information and communications technology (ICT). Although it is considered a workstyle for independent people as epitomized by freelancers and the like, in Japan, the term has come to convey something different from its original meaning, taking a unique direction in which some types of training programs are referred to as workcation. How did this change come about? This study, based on surveys of three regions, examines the origin and development of satellite office workcation and learning workcation to ascertain the following. (1) In Japan, people with workcation are assumed to be employees. (2) Therefore, the workcation is heavily influenced by local governments’ intentions (wanting to associate with exchange populations) and companies’ intentions (it is difficult to dispatch employees to outlying areas without a work-related purpose). (3) Therefore, the workcation has evolved into something that aims to enhance creativity, learning, and introspection through close ties with communities.

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Introduction

The work/vacation combination known as workcation has attracted considerable attention in Japan in recent years. Workcation\(^1\) is a neologism combining the words “work” and “vacation.” This concept came into existence in the early 2010s when major media in the West started using it (Amano, 2018). With the widespread use of ICT since the late 1990s, the barriers between work and vacation/private time have been blurred. Thus, the workcation emerged as a new work style symbolizing the increased blurring of the lines between work time and private time (Pecsek, 2018).

When the term workcation first came into use in the West, it meant “working on holiday,” because it was applied to flexible workers who could opt for take a time off relatively freely. Therefore, workcation (in the sense of “working on a holiday”) was discussed in the context of the impact it would have on various factors, such as people’s productivity, job satisfaction, and stress levels.\(^2\) For example, focusing on the negative impact of working while on vacation, Deci and Ryan (2008) argued that being unable to switch off from work

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\(^1\) Although the word is usually spelled “workcation” in the West, in Japan, it is sometimes spelled “worcation” (Tanaka & Ishiyama, 2020), while the Workation Alliance Japan and others spell it “workation.”

\(^2\) Even the West does not have a definition of workcation. For example, according to Pecsek (2018), “Workcation is a hybrid type of tourism when tourists travel for either leisure or dual (business and leisure) motive, and due to the modern technology, they perform both work and leisure activities away from home.”
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would lead to stress and illness.\(^3\) By contrast, Nawijn and Damen (2014) focused on the positive aspects of working during one’s time off, thereby contending that workcation reduces the psychological burden of returning to work after a vacation. Combining these two, Pecsek (2018) classifies workcation tourists into four categories and identifies the traits of stress-free workcation tourists who were eligible for workcations.\(^4\)

By contrast, things developed quite differently in Japan than in the West. As discussed in this paper, in Japan, the term workcation developed quite differently from that in the West because of the intentions of companies and local governments, differences in the understanding of workcations, and a focus on employed workers.

**Method**

This study, which aims to identify how workcation programs and policies are developed in Japan, conducted semi-structured interviews of 1–2 hours of the key parties involved in workcation programs and projects in three areas that have employed a proactive approach to workcation: the Kinan area (Wakayama Pref.), Myoko City (Niigata Pref.), and Tottori Prefecture (see the List of Interviews in the Appendix). Each interview comprises a predetermined order of questions related to (1) the background and development of

\(^3\) However, this is most likely attributed not to the actual “working on holiday,” but rather to tasks (a teleconference, etc.), the timing of which the employee cannot control. In fact, Takahashi, Ohkawa, and Inamizu (2014) identified a strong linear correlation between people’s degree of self-determination and their job satisfaction.

\(^4\) Other articles that could be worth mentioning include Peters and Heusinkveld (2010), which found that a CEO’s proactive attitude is critical to telework adoption, Boell, Cecez-Kecmanovic, and Campbell (2016), which is a comprehensive review of the advantages and disadvantages of introducing telework, and Leask (2010), which examines the concerns that vacation destinations have to deal with.
workcation, (2) workcation content, (3) future plans, and (4) attitudes and intentions. Follow-up questions regarding the related information were posed when appropriate. In the following section, we describe two cases of initiatives being considered in the three areas that were the subjects of this study.

**Case 1: Company S’s Satellite Office Workcation**

First case involves Company S’s satellite office in Wakayama Prefecture (the Kinan area), which can be called the cradle of the workcation in Japan. This case led to the Workcation Forum cosponsored by the Wakayama Prefectural Office with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications and the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry which developed a reputation as a pioneering workcation area.

1) Purpose of Wakayama Prefectural Office

Because of its distance from urban areas and its mountainous topography, the Kinan area in Wakayama Prefecture has been receiving attention from IT firms since 2001. First, it renovated a vacant recreational facility, 5 and it then started to lease space to urban IT companies as tenants. Although two companies actually moved in during this initial stage, both vacated the premises in around 2004. The companies had few advantages of setting up satellite offices in a tourism area to ensure that employees could do the same work as in the city when recharging their batteries. The officials of the Wakayama Prefectural Office attributed this failure to setting the goal of getting companies to move in and not being involved after they moved in. Therefore, the municipalities started

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5 During Japan’s bubble economy period (1986–1991), companies from urban areas had built recreational facilities for their employees. These facilities became vacant after the bubble economy collapsed.
offering ongoing support in the form of human connections on the home and work levels. Because of this policy shift, the case of Company S setting up a satellite office in 2015 started receiving attention.

2) Company S’s purposes

Company S established a satellite office in a plan to experiment how working in a local environment would affect its employees. Company S’s primary goals were as follows: (a) acquiring news coverage (increasing its brand equity), (b) refreshing its employees, (c) making a social contribution, and (d) encouraging employees to think in a different environment with external stimuli. The company chose to open a site in this region because it placed importance on these factors. Although the two companies that had withdrawn had been trying to ensure that employees do the same work in a resort area as they had done in the city, Company S broke new ground by having the goals of (c) making a social contribution and (d) employees’ introspection.

3) How the case came to be called as Satellite Office Workcation

In the beginning, the case of Company S was not considered an example of workcation. It was termed workcation in around 2017, which was two years after Company S opened its satellite office. The manager of the Wakayama Prefectural Office’s information policy unit adopted the word workcation to promote a Western type of workcation that would attract IT companies by conveying to them that their employees “could work while enjoying a vacation and

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6 This was inspired by the connection between an executive of Company S and the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications. At the time, the Ministry was recruiting test businesses for the dissemination of its “Furusato Telework” project, wherein people would do the same work in outlying areas that they had done in Tokyo.
getting refreshed.” An official of the Wakayama Prefectural Government explains the background as follows:

“Corporate officials would balk if they were asked to set up satellite offices. It is easier to talk about teleworking where employees are surrounded by nature and tourism resources.” Therefore, the case of Company S was considered a success story, and the name “Satellite Office Workcation” was coined.

**Case 2: Company J’s Learning Workcation Program**

The development of Case 1 led to Company J’s Learning Workcation Program. This initiative was the starting point of a unique development in Japan, where off-site group training is called workcation in numerous host sites (Tanaka & Ishiyama, 2020).

1) **Company J’s purpose and the birth story of Learning Workcation**

Headquartered in Tokyo, Company J helps companies train employees and publishes business-related books and notebooks. The company had long been aiming to develop a Human Resources (HR) training program that would incorporate both regional revitalization and cross-industry exchange. In around 2017, Company J’s president heard the manager of the Wakayama Prefectural Office’s information policy unit mention the term workcation in a speech, which turned into a business opportunity. Thus, Company J started with the consideration of a training program that would combine workcation with regional revitalization and cross-industry exchange, and the official decision to launch the Learning Workcation Program was developed in October 2018. In February 2019, Company J, the

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7 However, this approach entails problems related to corporate labor management (e.g., the vacation system and workers’ compensation regulations), and thus, it gradually evolved into being training-oriented approach.
Wakayama Prefectural Office, and two municipalities in the Kinan area entered into a comprehensive partnership agreement, and Learning Workcation Program C was conducted in this area from October 2019 through February 2020.

2) Purpose of a company that participated in Program C

Program C employed the revitalization of the Kinan area as a theme. In the curriculum, employees of companies in the Tokyo region attempted to realize businesses to help solve regional problems with local businesses while teleworking and participating in training. This pulled at the heartstrings of the companies in the Tokyo region. For example, Corporation C in the Tokyo region runs home delivery services, retail stores, and other businesses related to daily life. Corporation C had previously been running in-house practical training programs (group learning related to management by formulating business plans); however, new businesses in urban areas tended to be so large that business plans made in the training sessions could not be executed. Around this time, the company heard about Program C from Company J, with whom it had a long relationship. It was drawn by how Program C integrated “live” regional challenges and cross-industry exchanges with forming connections with people outside the company, and thus, it decided to dispatch an employee. This story shows that the elements of learning, introspection, and creativity enhancement while developing deep connections with the community allows companies to feel comfortable about sending their employees to the program.

3) The purposes of Myoko City and Tottori Prefectural Offices

Company J’s Learning Workcation Program is consistent with local governments’ desires. Therefore, it is being adopted by the Myoko City and Tottori Prefectural Offices.

Myoko City in Niigata Prefecture has long been a ski resort;
however, few skiers have been visiting in recent years, and even fewer tourists visit in summer than in winter. In around October 2018, the mayor pledged to increase the visitor population through telework. At first, the mayor’s orders were primarily concerned with the preparation of facilities, and thus, the city focused on the preparation of coworking spaces and internet environments at lodging facilities to attract people from the Tokyo area. However, the approach gradually changed after receiving feedback from business people from inside and outside the community and visiting the Kinan area. As of August 2020, the city had aimed to have corporate employees visit the city at the companies’ expense and has been supporting the development of programs focusing on “providing learning applicable to business.” This approach was consistent with that of Company J’s Learning Workcation Program. In around May and June of 2019, the Wakayama Prefectural Office had facilitated a connection between the Myoko City Office and Company J, and that November, those two parties had entered into a comprehensive partnership agreement. The Myoko City Office and Company J are developing a close cooperative relationship, and thus, Company J has launched its Learning Workcation Program in Myoko in October 2020.

Moreover, the Tottori Prefectural Office changed its approach in a similar way, and it is now developing a cooperative relationship with Company J. Tottori Prefecture embarked on migration promotion in fiscal 2007 to control its population decline. In fiscal year 2017, it expanded its efforts involving exchange population promotion. As an extension of this project, after general discussions in the prefectural assembly, in June 2019, it started to promote workcation. Similar to

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8 As per Mr. S, some of the reasons for opting for this approach is “freelancers who want to work while they are traveling are already doing it (even if they don’t use the word workcation)” and “the high hurdle in getting company employees to take a workcation (of the sightseeing type) at their own expense.”
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the Myoko City Office, the Tottori Prefectural Office was first considering to support for preparing facilities, aiming for the tourism context. However, as they spoke with company representatives, they realized that companies were not keen on the idea of “working on holiday,” and thus, they gradually shifted their approach to supporting programs that would involve local HR and companies. As of October 2020, Tottori was developing a cooperative setup with Company J that was similar to those in the previous two regions.

How Workcation Has Changed in Japan

Thus far, we have described two cases of workcation in three areas of Japan. In all of these areas and cases, the concept of workcation differs from its original meaning of “combining work with vacation.” The meaning has evolved into the incorporation of the connotation of “trying to enhance learning, introspection, and creativity through deep connections with the community.” In fact, unlike companies that initially set up facilities for employees to do the same work in a resort area that they did in the city, when Company S set up its satellite office, it connected with the community to stimulate employees’ introspection and allowed them to engage in social contribution activities. Furthermore, continuous support from the local government (the Shirahama Town Office) to make personal connections contributed significantly to its establishment. We further validated that all three of the local governments had shifted from workcation promotion campaigns that emphasized the tourism context supporting facilities preparation to campaigns that geared to training programs.

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9 Inamizu (2018) showed that a positive correlation exists among workplace behavior—which is characterized by collaboration,—flexibility, demonstration, and creativity. Thus, it is quite likely that local connections work to enhance creativity.
The case of Japan Airlines (JAL), which similar to Company S offers a trail-blazing workcation program in Japan, went through a similar evolution. In 2017, JAL had started up a system wherein employees could telework from wherever they were traveling. The initial purpose was to encourage its employees to take their paid vacation days and for them to refresh themselves. As of 2020, however, the company had shifted course toward having employees pursue learning and make local connections.

Why did this unique development take place in Japan? First of all, in Japan, people who avail workcation are assumed to be employed workers and not freelancers. This consideration is probably because the ratio of freelancers is low and because freelancers who want to work while on vacations are already doing so. Other reasons involve companies’ situations and local governments’ intentions. For workcation for employed workers, many other stakeholders are involved in addition to those for a normal vacation, and all of their interests must be aligned. Among them, the interests of the local governments and companies have the maximum influence, and local governments in Japan typically “want to enhance local relationships and increase the exchange population,” whereas companies located

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10 “Holiday style reform”: Paid vacation is promoted to acquire human resources (2017, July 10). *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* (in Japanese). Retrieved from https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXLASDZ07I8S_Z00C17A7MM8000

A man participated in the board meeting from Shiretoko: 60,000 people in Tokyo teleworked all at once. (2017, July 24) *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* (in Japanese). Retrieved from https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXLASDZ24H5S_U7A720C1000000

11 JAL is making use of workcation for new business (2020, October 19) *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* (in Japanese). Retrieved from https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXMZO65128270W0A011C2XXA000

12 In the OECD’s statistics on self-employment rates by activity for 2017, in Japan, the ratio of self-employed people among workers in service industries were 52.7% for men, at the 13th position among 18 countries, and 82.1% for women, at the 10th place among 15 countries. OECD, Self-employment rate by activity. https://data.oecd.org/entrepreneur/self-employment-by-activity.htm
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In cities usually find it “difficult to send employees to outlying areas without a work-related purpose.” Because of these conflicting desires, workcations have evolved into cross-border learning contexts.

Figure 1 shows how this change has evolved. The horizontal axis denotes the purpose of workcations (private-related purposes or work-related purposes), whereas the vertical axis denotes the degree of interaction with the local community. Because the idea of a workcation is affected by local governments’ intentions and companies’ situations, it has evolved into a cross-border learning context as shown at the upper right quadrant of Figure 1.

Therefore, because workcations in Japan started as an approach for both companies and local governments to achieve their goals vis-a-vis employed workers, the upshot is that the format of the workcation has been altered from its original meaning in the West. With this, workcations have taken on various forms, and thus, the term workcation has taken on a new meaning that rather than combining work and vacation combines work with communication,
innovation, and motivation.\textsuperscript{13}

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\textsuperscript{13} WORK × ation Site, Mitsubishi Estate’s workcation portal site (accessed on 2020/12/25) https://workxation.mec.co.jp/
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## Appendix: List of interviews

| Region                          | Organization/Position/ Name                          | Guest/Host         | Detail of Interviewee                     | Date      | Place      |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Kinan area, Wakayama Pref.      | Company S/ Director of Shirahama Satellite Office/Mr. C | Guest (Company)    | IT company headquartered in USA           | Oct. 12, 2020 | Zoom      |
| Kinan area, Wakayama Pref.      | Corporation C/ Section Chief, Human Resources Development Dept./Ms. O | Guest (Individual) | Retail and Distribution Company           | Aug. 6, 2020 | Zoom      |
| Kinan area, Wakayama Pref.      | Wakayama Prefectural Office/ Director, Information Policy Division/Mr. A | Host (Local Government) | Wakayama Prefectural Government          | Sep. 16, 2020 | Zoom      |
| Myoko City, Niigata Pref.       | Myoko City Office/ Section Chief, Planning Division/Mr. S (and his subordinate, Ms. E) | Host (Local Government) | Myoko City Government                     | Aug. 17, 2020 | Office, Zoom |
| Tottori Pref.                   | Tottori Prefectural Office/ Director of Exchange Population Promotion Office/Mr. D (and his colleague, Mr. U) | Host (Local Government) | Tottori Prefectural Government           | Oct. 7, 2020 | Office     |
| Kinan area, Wakayama Pref.      | Company J/ General Manager, New Business Dept./Mr. K | Host (Company)     | Human Resource Development Support Company | Jun. 2, 2020 | Zoom      |

*Source: Created by the author*