

The Role Time Plays in an Industrial Society

By Ato Ekusa

The demand for time accuracy changed with the development of industrial society. Just take a long look at Japan where the provinces possess their own kind of time zones, like Morioka time for example. Instead of beginning according to schedule, meetings there kick off 30 minutes or even an hour late. The reason lies in the fact that the local district is an agricultural area where farm work serves as the time standard. For agricultural tasks it does not matter if they begin one or two hours late. Rooted in an agricultural background, such districts tend to have a very casual attitude toward time.

Industrial societies, on the other hand, have to keep a close eye on the rotating conveyor belt, especially if they are engaged in such tasks as automobile manufacture. The leisure style of rural societies will not do here. Backed by an industrial setting, urban dwellers follow a more precise time schedule. If people do not keep up with time they cannot hope to survive in the city and its industrial society.

Time is measured according to the movement of the sun in both agricultural and industrial societies. Greenwich Mean Time is the basis for standard time throughout the world. Japan time is computed according to the sun's movement across the meridian at Akashi in Hyogo

Prefecture, 135 degrees east longitude. In an information society, however, the degree of accuracy of solar time is not sufficient.

Since the nuts and bolts of an information society are computers, whose operations are measured in milliseconds, the movement of the sun just cannot keep pace. To solve the problem, therefore, it is now possible to rely on the atomic clock, an extremely accurate timepiece that uses cesium-133 nuclei with a resonant frequency of 9,192,631,770 hertz.

The Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications' Communications Research Laboratory possesses the prototype of this apparatus and controls Japanese standard time. This atomic clock is said to have a degree of error of only one second in 300,000 years—the kind of accuracy that a computer society demands.

Despite the fact that society has reached this ultrahigh level of precision, the Japanese, with their roots in rice-paddy culture, have been unable as yet to escape from their agricultural background. Meetings do not begin on schedule and drag on for a long time. Even though the structure of society has shifted to that of an information society the Japanese mentality remains entrenched in the past.

The business community in Japan has begun to take steps to tackle this bad custom. For example, in line with a sugges-

tion from its president, Shiro Fujita, NTT Data Communications has been holding standing-only meetings since November 1992. The computer specialists at the company, which engages in systems design, tend to make mountains out of molehills and meetings tend to go on and on.

Apparently Fujita got this brainstorm after seeing the U.S. president standing at press conferences. While seated meetings continue for an average of two hours and 45 minutes, standing-only gatherings apparently last for only one hour and 30 minutes. Since this experiment was a first in Japan, the company could not find any long-legged tables of domestic make and had to place a special order at ¥200,000 per table. Nevertheless, the move has been effective in terms of making meetings shorter.

Shiroki Corp., an automobile and railway parts manufacturer, began a campaign to cut meetings in half in January. The company has reduced board meetings from once a month to once every two months, cut managerial meetings from twice to once a month and also halved the number of workshop-level meetings. According to the company's general affairs department the number of regular meetings has been reduced to 54%, or 51% in time. Calculated on the basis of the firm's average salary, this effort has amounted to a saving of ¥41 million.

One of the special features of decision-making in Japanese management is *nemawashi*, or laying the groundwork behind the scenes. Shiroki has tried to maintain thorough communication by introducing an original system using a special form. Unlike the top-down system of the United States, decision-making in Japanese companies involves keeping everyone properly informed and achieving a consensus, hence the numerous and lengthy meetings. In an information-oriented society, which demands promptness in decision-making, such unique aspects of Japanese business will probably disappear.

Ato Ekusa is a free-lance reporter based in Tokyo.



NTT Data Communications "standing-only" meeting room, a strategy which has effectively shortened meetings.