

Data in context – vacations in Japan

By Deanna Elstrom with Fumiya Shirahama



At one point during my career as a marketer, I had a boss whose favourite phrase was, “The devil is in the details”. I learned to hate that phrase. He was a numbers guy and convinced that truth could only be found in numbers. I, on the other hand, am an instinctively qualitative thinker. That said, he wasn’t wrong. In my more recent career as a market researcher, I have come to find that the devil IS in the details, especially when interpreting the numbers that describe human needs, motivations and behaviours. The details, in this case, are the cultural context.

When I saw the recent results from our Ipsos Global Advisor Survey (September 2018) on Vacations, I had a hunch that there was more to the story than the numbers

were telling. At first glance, the results seemed to confirm the standard perception of the Japanese employee as a workaholic slave to his/her job, unable or unwilling to take holiday, even when provided. In our survey, the Japanese employee is smack last in using up his/her vacation days, as well as taking time away from home, and the second most likely to check work messages and emails while on holiday. Yup, those workaholic Japanese, one is tempted to conclude. But, as always, cultural context can help explain the humans behind the numbers.

Firstly, we need to understand how holiday time works for most Japanese workers. Unlike in the U.S. where people have separate allocations of “vacation days”, “personal

days” and “sick days”, in Japan, all of these are grouped together as “kyuuka” (休暇). If you get 10 of these days a year, you are not going to readily use them up in one go. You will need to hold onto some of them for illness, family emergencies and other commitments (weddings, funerals, etc.). Beyond childcare needs for working parents, in the context of the rapidly aging society that is today’s Japan, many people will need to set aside time for care-giving of elderly family members. Thus, these “kyuuka” days are not truly “vacation days.” Rather, they are paid time off to manage the realities of living.

Social pressure and the great concern to avoid causing “meiwaku” (迷惑) (inconvenience/bother) to others may also explain the hesitance to use up one’s “vacation days”. There is the perception that, while one is out on holiday, one’s colleagues will have to absorb the additional work.

And, for those in client-facing positions, “meiwaku” will also be imposed upon clients. The extreme customer-first orientation of Japanese culture makes the idea that a client can wait utterly unacceptable. Taking more than one week of holiday during times when others would be working, especially clients, feels unimaginably indulgent within the Japanese social and corporate context.

Thus, the perception that one’s holiday is an absolute right to be taken, rather than a nice-to-have, is far weaker in Japan than in most other industrialized countries. In Japan, it truly is hard to take all of one’s allotted time because it causes bother to others. The social pressure is just too high to overcome. According to the survey, this is true across men and women and across age groups.

“I use up all of my vacation days that I am given”

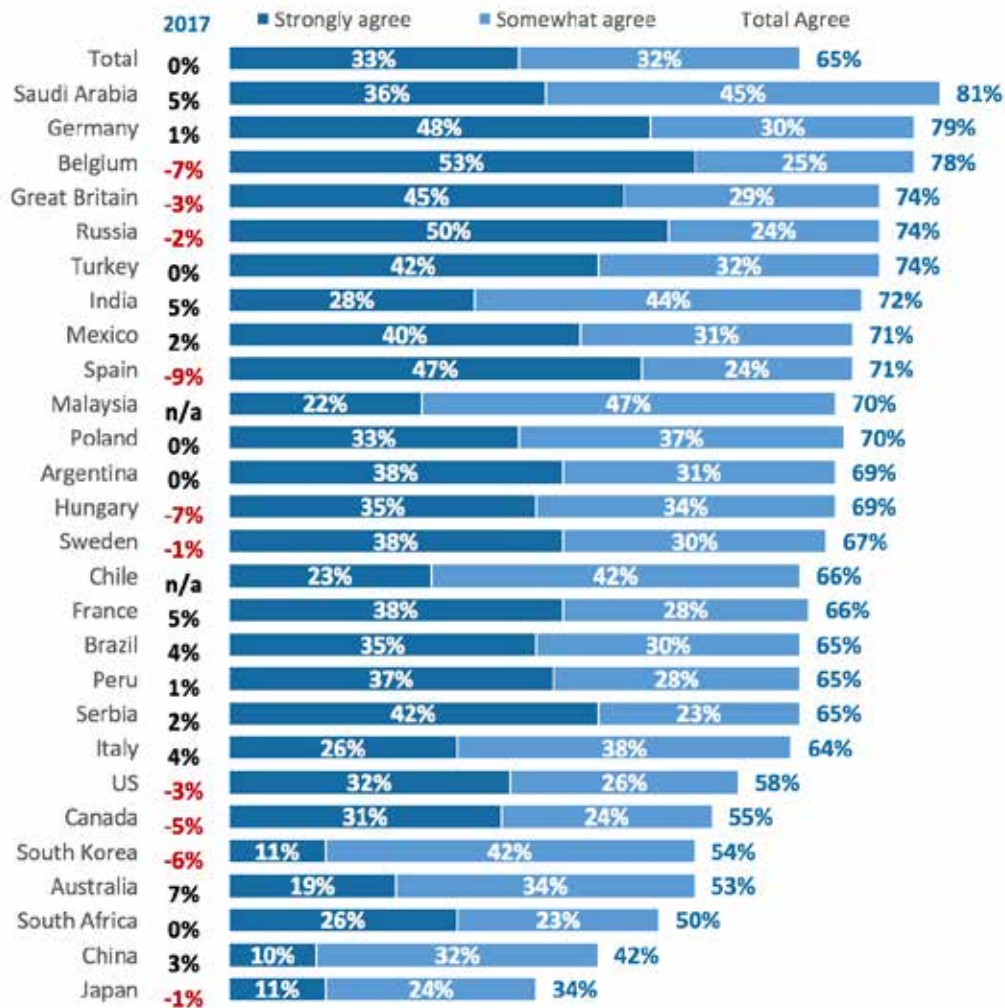


Figure 1



“I never check for messages/email back at my work when I go on vacation”

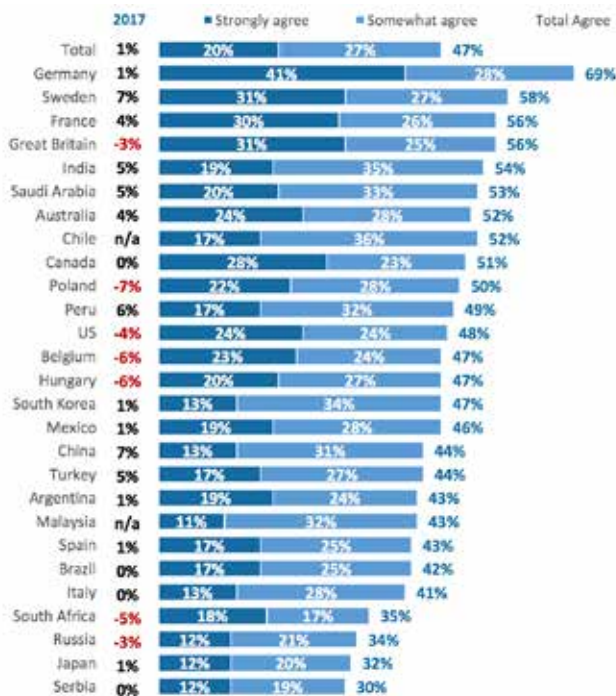


Figure 2

But, let's not forget about national holidays. In 2019, Japan will have 22 days of national holidays, having added two new days this year as the nation transitions to a new emperor and new era. This is compared to 11 in the U.S. and eight in the UK. Additionally, there are 3-5 days that Japanese employees are allocated for the “obon” (お盆) summer holiday which comes from the traditional practice of returning to one's hometown to welcome home ancestral spirits. Because one's co-workers are also on holiday during these collective holidays, one can truly relax and enjoy the time off.

“This year, I have spent or I will spend at least one full week away from my home on a vacation”

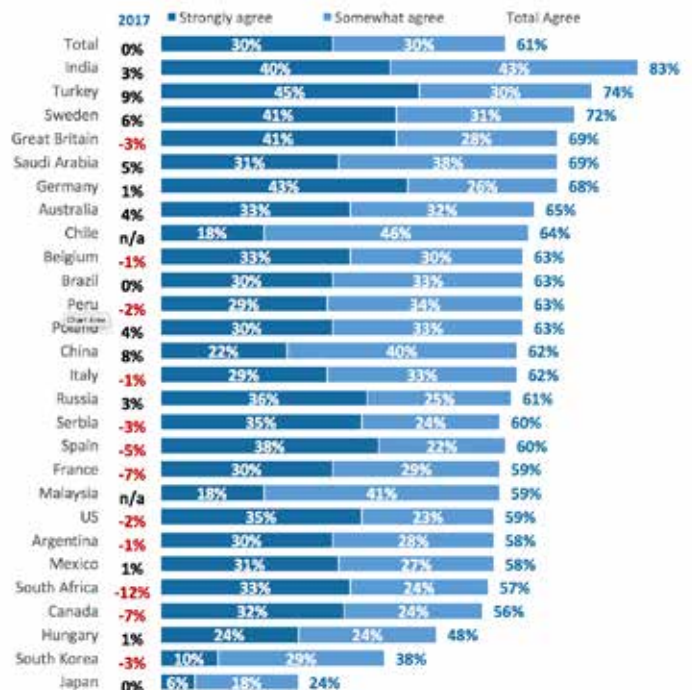


Figure 3

Understanding the details of the cultural context reveals that the hesitance to take holiday is not necessarily a reflection of a comparatively more workaholic mindset of the Japanese employee. Rather, the cultural context creates hurdles to taking time off outside of the shared time off provided by collective holidays.

As always, quantitative and qualitative research work together to bring to life the human behind the behaviour.

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