**Use the coronavirus crisis to promote teleworking**

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe sent shock waves across Japan last week with his decision to close schools to slow the spread of COVID-19. This abrupt decision drew fire from many schools, teachers and parents since it was announced with little preparation.

Although opinion is divided over the move, one thing is clear. The prime minister’s announcement sharply increased the public’s sense of urgency. The only effective way at the moment to prevent the spread of this novel coronavirus is decrease personal contact among people and to increase personal hygiene, such as hand-washing. Abe is now even considering enacting a special emergency law to help tackle the crisis. More people are coming to realize that the risk of infection is rising in local communities across the nation.

One welcome by-product of the crisis is that work-style reform is getting a much-needed boost because more companies are encouraging their employees to telework. This presents a great opportunity to change the nation’s archaic corporate culture, which demands high loyalty and long working hours from workers. If telecommuting becomes the norm, employees will be able spend much more time with their families and, most importantly, fathers will be able to spend more time participating in child care.

According to a survey by the internal affairs ministry, the percentage of Japanese firms that have adopted telework rose to 19.1 percent in 2018 from 11.5 percent in 2012 — a notable improvement — but the vast majority still do not. In a recent online survey of some 1,800 working mothers by Connehito Inc., 80.8 percent of the participants said they are not allowed to work from home due to their profession or a lack of online security. Many managers still feel uncomfortable if they can’t see their workers in person. And if employees work as a team, managers also worry that performance may decline if face-to-face communication is restricted.

Yuri Tazawa, the president of Telework Management Inc., a consulting firm specializing in telework, says she is often asked by corporate managers how they should evaluate employees who work from home. Instead of giving a straight answer, she often replies, “How do you evaluate workers if they work in the office?” Many managers fail to come up with a good answer. At that point, she says, they realize that they have been evaluating employees based on their work attitude, such as how late they stay in the office, rather than their performance.

After discovering that an employee had contracted COVID-19, Dentsu Group Inc. immediately closed its headquarters and ordered its 5,000 employees to work from home. Daiwa Securities Group Inc., which employs 10,000 people, created a telework system that allows employees with small children to work from home. The labor ministry’s announcement this week to provide subsidies of up to ¥1 million to small and medium-sized enterprises to cover half the cost of introducing telework should help such firms make the transition.

It is time for Japanese firms to change their mindset and promote telecommuting. The move will require preparation, such as setting up online communications systems. Once such systems are established, they can also be utilized in the event of natural calamities such as typhoons and earthquakes — an invaluable measure in this disaster-prone country.

By allowing employees to work remotely, fathers can become more involved in child-rearing and other household duties, which will help relieve the lopsided burden that many mothers — especially those who also work — are forced to shoulder. After taking a short child care leave, Environment Minister Shinjiro Koizumi said that he came to realize how hard it is for a single parent to take care of a baby.

It is also important to think about work-style reform ahead of this Sunday, which is International Women’s Day. Japan’s ranking in the 2020 World Economic Forum’s gender gap report hit a record low of 121st place. This poor result can largely be attributed to the fact that women’s workload inside the home remains much greater than men’s even though many of them also hold down jobs. There are now twice as many double-income households in Japan as single- income households.

A survey of 1,000 men last September by the Japan Trade Union Confederation (Rengo) also reveals that the average time working fathers spend for household duties is a mere 6.2 hours per week, while the average time they spend on child care is just 9.3 hours per week. While “taking out the garbage” was the No. 1 household duty performed by fathers, when it came to child care the top three tasks they performed with their children were taking a bath together, playing with them and waking them up.

Though the mood of the world is now gloomy, there is always a silver lining to every cloud. Moving forward with the adoption of remote working programs will not only help the nation better deal with the COVID-19 epidemic, it will also make society a better place for women and families. While the epidemic continues and schools remain closed, companies should allow their employees to work from home as much as possible, and working parents — especially fathers — should try to spend more time with their children.