


Mutually Supportive Society

One of the Hatoyama administration's policy goals calls for a "Japanese society whose members offer mutual support," as the prime minister put it in his first policy speech in the National Diet. It seeks to realize a society where each person can discover "a place he or she belongs" and "a role to play." Following are examples of such a society seen in various parts of Japan.



An employee makes yellow dustless chalk. Nearly 70% of the employees at this plant have intellectual disabilities.

People with Disabilities & Factory: Helping Each Other

In the industrial city of Kawasaki, lying to the southwest of Tokyo, is located a small, old chalk-producing factory. This small plant has a big reputation: a government-designated model factory for the active employment of people with physical and mental disabilities. Prime Min-

ister Yukio Hatoyama visited the factory in October 2009 as it symbolizes his call for the establishing of a Japanese society whose members offer one another mutual support.

Nihon Rikagaku Industry Co., the operator of the plant, is known as Japan's top maker of

dustless chinks. The number of employees at the Kawasaki plant is 47, of whom 33, or 70%, are people with intellectual disabilities. The company has more than 50 years of experience in employing people with disabilities.

The firm began to employ individuals with disabilities in response to a request from a teacher at a school for the disabled. The teacher asked the company to give the handicapped a chance to gain work experience. The plant accepted two young women. Impressed with their hard work, some ordinary staffers proposed hiring the handicapped women as regular workers. Nihon Rikagaku Chairman Yasuhiro Oyama says this led to the company's current employment of a large number of people with disabilities.

More than half of these employees suffer from severe disabilities. Some of them cannot read while others cannot understand numbers. This required the company to devise some innovative measures. Traffic signals provided a clue about how to overcome these obstacles because the employees in question could distinguish different colors. They were instructed to use red-colored

weights to gauge the amount of powder in a red-covered can. Hourglasses were used to measure the time needed to mix chalk powder. The firm devised processes in accordance with the disabled employees' levels of understanding. And this paid dividends as these employees are diligent and work patiently once they understand the process. Still, Oyama emphasizes that this is no charity project.

"We can maintain this working format without falling into the red," says Oyama. The employees with disabilities represent business potential and are also human resources for the chalk plant.

"Like everyone, people with disabilities can also find more meaning in life if they feel they are doing something useful and feel needed by others," Oyama says. "It is a great pleasure for our company to be able to make people with disabilities happy."

 On the Internet

http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/hatoyama/actions/200910/20sisatu_e.html
http://rikagaku.co.jp/top/top_e.htm



Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama on a visit to Nihon Rikagaku Industry's Kawasaki plant watches an employee measuring powder to make chalk.

Photo: Cabinet Public Relations Office

Companies Putting Families First

Japan's population suffered a year-on-year decline for the first time ever in 2005, when it marked the highest with 127 million. Projections show Japan's population potentially falling below 90 million in 2055 if its low birthrate and demographic shift to a grayer society continue on their current trajectories. Naturally, the working population would decrease under such a scenario. As part of efforts to curb this distinctly unfavorable trend and preempt a precipitous population decline, the Japanese government has launched a key strategy for supporting the nation's children and families.

Kamite Co., a machinery parts maker based in Kosaka, Akita Prefecture, is one Japanese corporation that has been recognized with a prime

ministerial award for its measures supporting the child-rearing efforts of employees. The government began giving such awards in 2008.

At 7:50 a.m., his breath white in the freezing air, Ryo Shimono arrives at Kamite with his 2-year-old son, Ko, and 4-year-old daughter, Yui, in tow. For the Shimono family, this is a daily routine. Ko and Yui enjoy their days at Kamite's in-house nursery, playing with friends and nursery staff and eating snacks. At 5 p.m., their father clocks out and returns to pick them up. Neither do Ko and Yui feel lonely as their father comes to see them during his lunch break.

Kamite established the in-house daycare center at its plant in 2000. The nursery has recently even come to accept children of



Employees of Kamite Co. come to see and play with their children during their lunch break at the corporation's in-house daycare center. Parents and children play with stickers.

employees from other firms. The nursery is free for parents and can look after up to 10 children. Yasuhiro Kamite, president of the company, said his firm established the nursery at the request of its employees. The nursery is highly appreciated by child-rearing employees, who say the system has helped to boost their working efficiency, Kamite said.

In a policy speech at the National Diet in October, Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama said, "Child-rearing and education are no longer simply personal concerns. We need to view them as investments in the future." The prime minister went on to say: "Let us aim to build a country in which...people do not have to give up their jobs for child-rearing or nursing care."

With the government beginning to address the demographic shift, the number of businesses that follow in the footsteps of Kamite and support employee efforts to raise children is expected to increase gradually.



Kamite Co., founded in 1988, produces parts of machines such as cameras, printers and TVs. An employee makes parts using a 45-ton press in the factory.

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On the day of the season's last home match, hometown fans—both adults and children—sign in to cheer on the Fajiano Okayama soccer team.

Ardent Supporters Buoy Team

"8,500 Fans Turn Out to Cheer Team"—such trumpeted the headline on the first page of the local Sanyo Shimbun. This headline belongs to a story about the last game of the 2009 season on the home field of the professional soccer team Fajiano Okayama of the J2 Japan soccer league.

The team was only promoted to the J2 league in 2009. The team was last in the league, compiling a less-than-impressive record. On the day in question, the team lost by a score of one to zero. However, the enthusiasm of the supporters never flagged as they filled Momotaro Stadium

with their loud cheers and colorful flags until the last moment. Fajiano Okayama is the first professional sports team in the prefecture and the local people unite behind it, giving the team their unconditional and passionate support.

Fajiano Okayama has no cash-flush parent company that foots the bill. Rather, it is a club team supported solely by the locals. The financial management of the team is supported by approximately 300 of Okayama's small and middle-sized companies. These companies chip in via small sponsorship fees, the accumulation



Fajiano Okayama finds it hard to chalk up a win, ending in a draw against Consadole Sapporo in a home-turf match at Momotaro Stadium in March. Photo: Fajiano Okayama

of which funds the team's activities. This achievement is the result of the persistence of Masaaki Kimura, who represents the team. His fervent wish is that the team will "become like a family member to Okayama's people, who will share in the joy and sorrow of the team together."

Support of the team comes in different forms and from different segments of society. Volunteers oversee the running and behind-the-scenes

operations for the games. Haircuts for players, a gym for training, and team suits for traveling on the road are all provided free of charge. There are restaurants where players can eat curry and noodles for free, while donation boxes for the team are placed in pubs and restaurants.

Although the team's results are less than spectacular, attendance for the matches averages some 6,200 people and ranks an impressive seventh out of the 18 teams in the J2 league. And it is the constant and enthusiastic support of the people of Okayama that keeps it going.

 On the Internet

<http://www.fajiano-okayama.com/>

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Fajiano Okayama lost the match, but their fans continued to cheer up their beloved team enthusiastically until the very end.



Locals, Ingenuity Fuel Railroad Survival

Railway services operating within and between rural regions face financial difficulties almost without exception. The major reason for this is a lack of passengers resulting from society's ever-increasing reliance on motorized forms of transport as well as its flagging birthrate and rapidly aging population. But were these railroads to go under, many people—notably elderly people and high school students—would be deprived of a vital means of transportation. One railroad company in the Tohoku region, northeastern Japan, is leveraging a little creativity and the help of local residents as it struggles to survive:

Yamagata Railway Co. which operates the 30-kilometer Flower Nagai Line.

On December 19, the railway tracks were covered with snow. Santa Claus—an authentic Santa authorized by Lapland, the land of Santa Claus in Finland—was in town for Santa Train, an event especially organized to bring the joy of Christmas to more children. As it continued to snow steadily, the train pulled out of the station on the Nagai line carrying children accompanied by their parents. The children posed ecstatically for photographs with a real Santa. In 2009, the Santa Train event was held



Participants taking part in the Santa Train event strike a pose for a commemorative picture with Santa Claus, visiting from Finland. A total of 101 participants, both adults and children, turned out to ride the train with Santa through the snow.



This is the station at which the Santa Train turns around to make the return trip. Event participants greeted Santa Claus at the station, with elementary school students giving a handbell performance and singing in a chorus. The many candles were crafted by hand by local high school students.



for the third time and it has already become an annual event on the Nagai line.

Local residents turn out in force to support the event. Local shop owners arranged for meals and cleared snow, while high school students made candles by hand, pouring wax

into paper cups. Junior high school students decorated the Nagai line stations. Even local kindergarten and elementary school children took part in the fun and helped to liven up the event by singing in a chorus.

The future survival of this regional railroad, run by the local governments along the line and the private sector, hinges on mustering enough creative ideas and ingenuity to attract sufficient customers to fight financial difficulties. Yamagata Railway has no designs on being the “number one” railroad, but rather aspires to be the “only one” for local residents. Toward this end, it continues to devise plans for events—parties, meetings and festive events such as the Tanabata star festival in summer—all of which take place aboard the train.



A little girl hands over for recycling a bag of caps from plastic bottles. Her efforts land her a 10-horsepower bill in the Atom Currency, and recycling the caps means that they will be recycled rather than incinerated, preventing 8 grams of carbon dioxide from being released into the atmosphere. The bottle caps are sold at a price of 10 yen per 400 units for use in building materials. The proceeds go to purchasing vaccines for children in developing countries.

Photo: TEZUKA PRODUCTIONS CO., LTD.

Astro Boy: Empowering Local Currency

A local currency called the Atom Currency started to circulate in the Takadanobaba shopping district of Shinjuku Ward, Tokyo, on April 7, 2004. Atom, named after the sci-fi animation of *Astro Boy*, was first created by Osamu Tezuka in 1952. Atom, as the story goes, was born on April 7, 2003, in a fictional Science Ministry building located in Takadanobaba. The Atom Currency was inaugurated on the same day as his birth in memory of Atom's birthday.

The regional currency is managed by an executive committee with members from Waseda University and Tezuka Productions Co., both of which floated the idea of the currency. A unit of the currency is called "horsepower." One unit of horsepower is worth one yen. Organizers of events—such as street clean-ups and plastic bottle collection activities—that are good for local residents, the area and the environment pay participating volunteers with the Atom Currency received in exchange for

deposits.

The currency is accepted by about 170 shops in Takadanobaba and the neighboring Waseda district. Shops offer discounts, free coffee and larger helpings of rice to those who use the currency. With the services it buys varying from shop to shop, the currency was conceived more as a "tool to express appreciation" than as a hard currency.

In fact, primary objectives of the Atom Currency are to promote community service activities and revitalize local shopping streets. To keep it fresh, the currency gets a design makeover every year. The uniquely designed currency has even developed a fan base, so much so that some people come from the far corners of Japan to collect it.

These achievements have put the Atom Currency in the spotlight and today it is being eyed by other communities across Japan looking to harness the power of *Astro Boy* to revitalize local communities.

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The three types of the Atom Currency: 10-horsepower, 50-horsepower and 100-horsepower bills. Each bill is printed on high-quality paper and sports a watermark image of Astro Boy. Recently a total of 10 shopping districts have introduced the currency, with more considering the idea.

Photo: TEZUKA PRODUCTIONS CO., LTD.