

A Small-town Strategy

Supporting Child Rearing and Personal Connections

Making a Skill into a Job: A skillful tailor was commissioned to do needlework jobs, and is now planning and selling her own products



The government and people of Nagi, a town in Okayama Prefecture, have come together to support child rearing and new ways of working in an attempt to make a path for the future of the town.

Registrants go to work along with their children



Corporate Supporters: With requests from corporations, local workers check product assortments or act as product monitors



Skills are checked, and data entry work is done by those who meet the standards



KUMIKO SATO

NAGI, a small town with a population of 5,800 located in northeastern Okayama Prefecture, has established the Nagi Comprehensive Strategy for Creating Town, People, and Jobs to preserve the town's vitality and industrial capacity while maintaining a population of 6,000.

The strategy is based on the Act on Overcoming Population Decline and Vitalizing Local Economy in Japan, which was announced in November of the previous year, and together with reoccurring resident-run workshops, is centered on the vitalization of the local economy through support of proper child rearing and working style reform.

Amidst the merging of cities, towns, and villages that began at the beginning of the 2000's across Japan, Nagi decided to remain an independent town despite its small size, and moved forward with measures to strengthen support of child rearing as a pillar of the town's autonomy. As a result, the total fertility rate, which stood at 1.41 in 2005 (national average in 2005: 1.26), grew to 2.81 in 2014 (national average in 2014: 1.42) (recently, the rate stood at 2.39 in 2017,

All photos: Courtesy of Nagikara

with the national average at 1.43 the same year).

The strategy is a meaningful attempt to strengthen this kind of child-rearing support while also activating the economy through establishing new industries. Nagikara, a general incorporated association that grew out of this process, was designated by the town of Nagi as an organization promoting local revitalization, and continues to develop a variety of projects as a leader of the town's strategy.

The Shigoto Konbini (Job Convenience Store) is one such exemplary effort. It is a program to connect local and outside businesses with women of child-bearing age, retired senior citizens, and others in the town who were often not workers in the past, and since its inception in 2017, there have been 181 registrants resulting in an extraordinary 23 million yen (210,000 US dollars) in total compensation.

"Originally, local businesses complained that there weren't enough workers in the town. We also heard from many mothers who were currently raising children, saying that they wanted to work during their free time. So I thought we should create a plan to connect businesses with mothers who want to work," says Akiko Ichii, Nagikara's representative director. Ichii asked Hatara Collabo Inc., an HR consulting firm



Chomin Sensei (Local Teachers): Twelve people of various ages, from 30 to over 70, act as teachers of balloon art, garden pruning and more

in Okayama City, for cooperation, and Shigoto Konbini began through this public-private partnership.

But it wasn't all smooth sailing from the beginning. Ayako Kusaka, CEO of Hatara Collabo Inc., says that, "both local and outside businesses and local residents registered with Shigoto Konbini have their own individual circumstances. We needed to properly approach this."

With Shigoto Konbini, businesses do not hire registrants, but instead commission them to do jobs, and the commissioned work is completed through short-term work sharing by registrants. Through creating a team system, registrants can help one another in managing time, distributing work load and so on. Additionally, Shigoto Sutando (Job Stand), the home base facility for Shigoto Konbini, has been set up with an open space where children can play, enabling working registrants to bring their children and also do their jobs.

"However, we felt like there was only so far the business could go with just commissioned work. So from 2018, we started an initiative for the workers to create jobs themselves," says Hatara Collabo Inc.'s Shohei Inoue. This led to further development at Shigoto Konbini.

Among the projects established are Chomin Sensei (Local Teachers), where registrants teach their knowledge and skills, Making a Skill into a Job, and Corporate Supporters, where jobs are created through utilization of skills. And through the idea of one woman teaching needlework through Local Teachers, Shigoto Konbini is promoting an initiative that takes children's old clothes, makes them into patchwork, and creates products from the patchwork designs. Additionally, with the Corporate Supporters project, registrants planned gift merchandise for an egg producer. The producer implemented the detailed plan right away as it reflected the opinions of consumers, and sales have been great.

Ichii says, "each of the registrants has become a sole proprietor, and you can see the results of how they have connected with and are contributing to the local society. I think this is very significant."

The core of the Shigoto Konbini project lies in the creation of new working styles, and is not limited to employment support. Moving forward, local residents will take over the administration of Shigoto Konbini, aiming to create a town full of working people with a cheerful desire to work and to make Nagi itself into a brand. **V**