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‘Nomunication’ in the Japanese workplace

In the evenings in Japan’s lively downtown streets, work continues in the pubs and bars, with businesspeople in suits gathered drinking and talking. Periodically, and in extreme cases several times a week, businesspeople go drinking after work with their bosses and colleagues.

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On weeknights in Japan, pubs are bustling, but the atmosphere is quite different from Australian pubs. Japanese people tend not to gather with friends and family, but with workplace superiors and colleagues. It’s common to see workplace associates discussing company problems and progress over a few, and sometimes more than a few, beers in the downtown drinking districts.

Although these drinking companions are not necessarily on particularly close terms in the office, senior staff invite junior, and whole departments go out together. It’s an opportunity for less experienced employees to eavesdrop on the conversations of their superiors, and to get to know them better. A portmanteau of the Japanese word for ‘drinking’ and the English ‘communication’, *Nomunication* is considered very valuable to employees.

The reason drinking is such an integral part of the Japanese workplace comes down to a cultural convention which dictates that Japanese people clearly separate *Honne*, one’s true feelings, and *Tatemae*, one’s official position, in the workplace. They rarely become too intimate with either superiors or co-workers, and maintain a constant sense of distance. *Nomunication* helps to reduce this psychological gap and brings out workers’ *Honne*, which results in smoother office interactions. This kind of communication helps to clarify feelings that are hidden in the office setting, gives workers a fresh view of their colleagues, and helps to forge strong relationships. Sharing personal details and honest views gives employees a sense of closeness, with the advantage of making it easier to make requests and ask favours later in the workplace.

For Japanese people, who have little opportunity to discuss their true feelings at work, drinking with colleagues is a way of understanding the individual in the next cubicle, and facilitating the building of human relations.

