

Wadachi Computer House

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◆ What is Wadachi Computer House?

Wadachi Computer House is a workplace that was established to help people with severe physical disabilities to make an independent living using computers. There are presently 40 workers with disabilities (hereafter referred to as *Shoin*), most of whom have quadriplegia.

In the 1980's, when work projects for people with physical handicaps were first begun in Japan, most of the work available was some sort of manual labor, and the average wage was only from several thousand yen to ten thousand yen a month. Some *Shoin* have reflected on that time as follows: "Even though I worked all day, my work was only worth a few hundred yen." "I wanted to work to become economically independent." Similar voices were finally united in an attempt to find work besides manual labor that could fulfill this goal of economic independence. In seeking work besides manual labor that would draw upon the *Shoin's* remaining abilities, computer-associated work was selected because it filled this requirement and also seemed to fit the increasing social needs of the time.

In 1984, after *Shoin* participated in special lectures on bookkeeping by professional accountants and workshops on computer use, Wadachi *Sagyosho* (Wadachi Workshop) was established. Although it was not at first recognized by the government, after 1990 it was restructured under the name "Wadachi Computer House" (hereafter referred to as Wadachi) and was officially recognized as a vocational aid center for people with physical disabilities. From 2007, Wadachi's administrative structure was changed according to the new Japanese law to support the independence of people with handicaps (*Shogaisha Jiritsu Shien Ho*) such that Wadachi became a multifunctional-type facility including three separate categories of *Shoin*: those who receive vocational aid (*shuro ikou shien*), referred to as Type A; those who receive vocational continuation support (*shuro keizoku shien*), referred to as Type B; and those who receive daily-life support (*seikatsu kaigo*). Type A *Shoin* are employed under labor contracts.

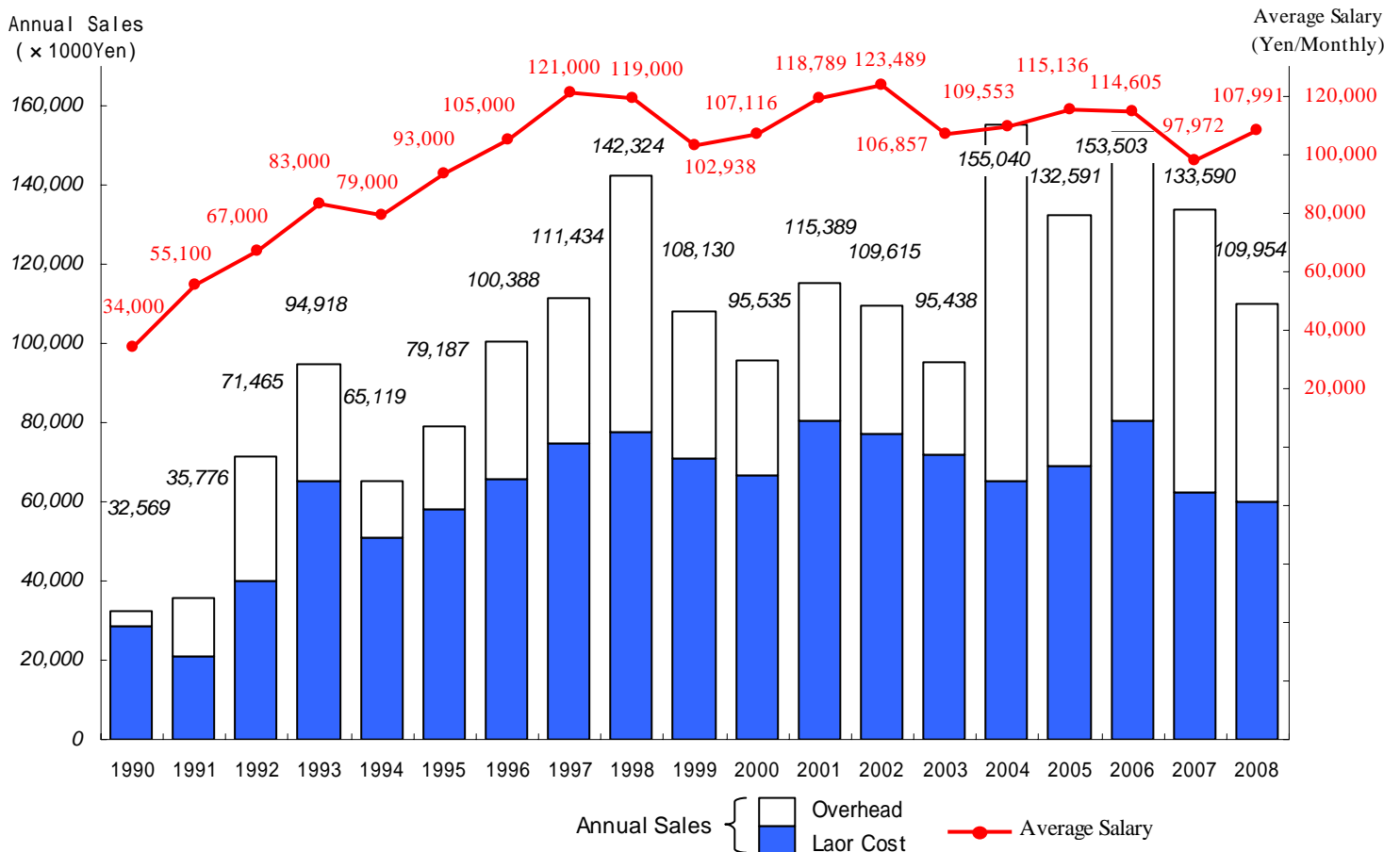
The present content of the work done by Wadachi *Shoin* is extremely varied.



Consignments from government agencies, general corporations, and other types of organizations include data input and processing, homepage production, planning and consulting on projects, calculating, survey analysis, tape transcription, direct mail services, system development, and IT support for the disabled.

Work at Wadachi is decided and delegated according to each person's ability and degree of physical handicap. Wadachi's special feature is that important decision-making is done by the *Shoin* themselves, who play an integral role in all that goes on at Wadachi. Of course *Shoin* make decisions with customers about consulting, project development, and delivery, and they often show better knowledge of the work issues than Wadachi's support staff (hereafter referred to as **Staff*). *Shoin* also have the opportunity to exercise their abilities in process management as they oversee the speed and accuracy of work done by part-time non-disabled employees. When there is a lot of work to be done (e.g., materials arrangements, field investigation preparation, staff meetings with customers, and deliveries), *Shoin* stay at work until late at night and work on holidays, just as employees in other companies. As a result, during an annual inspection by government officials, Wadachi was warned to shorten the working hours of the *Staff*, but the *Shoin* objected saying, "This institution is not for the *Staff*!"

As a result of Wadachi *Shoin* and *Staff* working in a united effort, Wadachi's annual income has been more than one hundred million yen since 1996, and the average monthly wage for *Shoin* is now more than one hundred thousand yen per month. (See graph below.)



The organizational structure and self-management by *Shoin*

Wadachi consists of two business divisions, which are further divided into a total of eleven separate work groups. *Shoin* belong to one of the two divisions and to one or more of the eleven work groups. Since April 2007, when Wadachi's administrative system changed to a multifunctional-type facility according to the new governmental law (*Shogaisha Jiritsu Shien Ho*) explained earlier, *Shoin* must now receive official permission and documentation from the local government before they can work at Wadachi, thus determining the amount of financial aid Wadachi can receive from the government.

Wadachi also has a sales department under its direct control, where *Shoin* and *Staff* work primarily with sales.

Shoin usually work at the Wadachi office, but since introducing IT business, *Shoin* can also work at home. Although working hours are in principle 9:00~17:00, they can be adjusted according to the physical and daily-life conditions of individual *Shoin*.

Shoin sometimes work alone and sometimes work in teams. In the case of large jobs, several teams may work together. In the weekly Monday work meetings, individual responsibilities are decided and adjustments are made as progress reports are heard and checked.

Process management, project planning, budget planning, accounting, salary assessment, and decisions concerning admittance of new members are basically under *Shoin* control. Decisions concerning ways of improvement in computer knowledge and skills, such as attending training workshops or inviting instructors to conduct training workshops, are also completely made by the *Shoin*.

◆ The role of Wadachi *Shoin* and *Staff*

Mr. B, who has severe cerebral palsy and a speech impediment, requires the use of a wheelchair and needs help with most aspects of his daily life, for example, eating, using the restroom, and so on. He has been a member of Wadachi since the time of its establishment and is its most seriously disabled member. The fact that he taught himself computer programming and received official certification as a computer programmer



clearly shows how hard he has worked. He now develops systems as a systems engineer at Wadachi, working 2 days a week at Wadachi and the other days at his home.

The work of Mr. B varies from developing management systems for golf courses, developing management systems for membership in all kinds of groups, to developing management systems for taxi services. He not only participates from the beginning in all levels of the business discussions, but he also plays an important leadership role in the development of his team. With his understanding of the complicated world of merchandise

management, he is able to propose and develop systems that please customers by saving them time. "What used to take full-time staff a month to do in a staring contest with the account books can now be done by anyone in no time at all." "We can now take a holiday." "I have time to read the newspaper again." Such comments from his customers are what encourage Mr. B.

Although a member of the Wadachi *Staff* accompanies Mr. B to meetings with customers because of his dysgraphia and speech impediment, with the arrival of email and remote maintenance, most of the obstacles in his job because of his disabilities have disappeared. What is now a challenge to Mr. B is that he often has to do more and more correspondence during the major holidays and weekends because of the need to coordinate with his customers' work schedules.

The reason why Wadachi itself started doing aggregation management began with a comment from Mr. B: "I might be able to develop an aggregation system for questionnaires." Twenty years ago the work of aggregation meant having to write into the program all the necessary aggregate set ups. In order to do this, Mr. B had to work day and night for days in order to get the needed aggregation results. After that, with



suggestions from his colleagues, the program was improved so that it is now able to be easily set up and handled by many other *Shoin*. Moreover, it is now possible to input, check, and tally several investigations at the same time. These efforts at labor-saving, standardization, and quality control are made good use of in developing systems for customers.

Mr. M is totally blind. He formerly worked in private enterprise but retired because of the gradual loss of his sight. With a desire to do computer work, he joined Wadachi when he was 36. After much searching for what he could do, he found that tape transcription was and continues to be work suited to his abilities.

Mr. H has a congenital skin disease requiring frequent changing of gauze bandages. His disease also makes it impossible for him to go outdoors during the summer. Working from his home, he is in charge of making the homepage of the AJU Center for Independent Living.



At Wadachi, there are also various other *Shoin* with different types of disabilities, for example, those with hearing loss, mental disabilities, highly advanced brain-function disorders, among others.

The responsibilities of the Wadachi *Staff* are to

find and set up work for each *Shoin* that bring out the best in the *Shoin's* differing abilities and to ensure that each work project has a system for quality control. Moreover, since *Staff* try to develop new areas of work for *Shoin*, their work is not rigidly fixed but is aimed at being flexible to meet the needs of the *Shoin* thereby helping them become more and more independent.

◆ **Wadachi as a consulting group making the most of disabled persons' experience**

Wadachi has worked toward making a secure place of employment for seriously disabled individuals. The source of its inspiration was the movement in Aichi Prefecture among people with disabilities themselves. In the 1970's, discrimination of the disabled was commonplace in Japan. At that time in Nagoya, there was only one bathroom for the handicapped, at a rehabilitation facility. In 1973, the words in a letter to the editor of a local newspaper: "People with disabilities, let's go to town!" gave birth to the movement of "The Association to Improve the Life of the Seriously Disabled in Aichi." Rather than blaming society and shutting themselves in and away from society, disabled people moved toward changing themselves and making a direct appeal to society to change as well. From the beginning, the main issue in working toward "citizen-based town welfare planning" was the problem of how to incorporate labor, transportation, and independent living for the disabled. Methods of putting pressure on government agencies and other related organizations were developed in various forms to deal with these issues.

Twenty years passed. In 1995, when citizen-based town planning regulations were enforced in Aichi Prefecture with the aim to show care for all citizens, we believe Wadachi came forward as the first citizen-based town-planning group consultant in all of Japan made up of people with disabilities. Work for persons with disabilities was finally made possible through the many years of diligent effort made by the movement of people with disabilities. In recent years, Wadachi has been entrusted with such business as the universal design of Central Japan International Airport (Centrair) as well as with consultation on the barrier free aspects of the Aichi World Exposition. Wadachi worked in a position of responsibility from the early stages of the basic development of these projects. In the negotiations for a barrier free environment for the new Mt. Fuji Shizuoka Airport, which will open in 2009, Wadachi has worked to help act as a voice to represent fellow disabled citizens in Shizuoka.

A characteristic of Wadachi is that it now not only reflects the interests of people with limb disabilities, but also people with visual impairment, people with hearing loss, people with mental disabilities, senior citizens, and childcare groups. People with professional experience from each group are authorized to speak for the group and to reflect the opinion of the group in planning. A good example is the case of public restrooms. Although it requires more space and more money, recently it has become common to build multipurpose restrooms. One reason for this is that it became clear that multipurpose restrooms are frequently used not only by people with disabilities but also by tourists and parents with children. Therefore, a multipurpose restroom that can be used

easily by a variety of people is likely to be used more frequently, as is evident from recently built shopping centers with such restroom facilities. By changing the width of the entrance of the general toilet stall from 600mm to 800mm, access becomes possible for anyone using a wheelchair. In the case of Central Japan International Airport, more than 1000 voices of people who would be affected by the facilities were gained through meetings or inspections. As a result, Central Japan International Airport achieved the aim of becoming "an airport easy to be used by everyone."

In the case of the Aichi World Exposition, active exchanges of opinions were held during planning in order to give people who normally would have little such opportunity the chance to attend and participate in this event. As a result, various facilities, exhibitions, information dissemination, human services, and hospitality training for staff by disabled persons were successfully adopted.

In addition, Wadachi has been entrusted with a variety of responsibilities including consultations concerning the facilities for roads and buildings, communication equipment, experiments demonstrating input assistance software, product evaluation, as well as barrier-free training of staff in stores selling vehicles for use by people with disabilities.

Recently, as a result of the suffering experienced by people with disabilities during and after the Tokai area flood disaster, we at Wadachi have been emphasizing the need for utilizing GIS (Geographical Information System) to help in determining escape routes, setting up refuge support systems, including the need for refuge partitioning sets, and establishing overall disaster prevention plans.



We have found, however, that when a disabled-persons group tries to become involved in general outside social projects, they are initially treated warily by others.

Therefore, our motto is "Never give up! Try, try, and try again!"

◆ Wadachi's wisdom

What supports the successful work of Wadachi in the above-mentioned projects is the application of IT techniques as our tools, the accumulation of diverse skills and know-how, the practical use of various kinds of human-power, and having a successful scheme for training people.

In the 1990's, hopeful remarks were made such as, "There is a growing possibility for the employment of disabled people who can use PC," and with the popularization of the Internet, we heard, "Work can be done at home using IT." To tell the truth, however, we were skeptical of the truth of these hopes. Although IT is just a tool, the impression at that time was that one could become independent just by using IT. Our skepticism was due to the fact that we felt there was a lack of understanding of the importance of

developing the work project itself and raising it to a level required by societal demands. Work projects could not be developed simply by connecting separate operations, and this was clear from the failure of work that had been done at home by *Shoin* until that time.

If Wadachi has been successful and received favorable evaluation, it is thanks to the support among the *Shoin*, the existence of model *Shoin* with serious disabilities, the motivation of *Shoin* to obtain a wage that represents the true value of the work they offer society, and to the *Staff* who work to support and fill in the gaps of the *Shoin* challenging to increase their expertise.

In making practical use of the governmental and public system, we try to use our status as an official welfare group to our advantage and to utilize various assistance systems for the maintenance of our IT equipment. In addition, we try to use aid available for research and activities to create employment for people with disabilities



On the other hand, where it used to be that most of our consignments came mainly from free government contracts, we now face a hard battle because of the introduction of competitive bidding which has become a formidable obstacle in this area. In 2004, a revision in the enforcement order of a local government law made it possible for [Jusan-institutions](#) to bid for free contracts above the

upper limit amount, but these were limited to contracts for “things to be sold.” From March 2008, however, work dealing with such things as data input and homepage production was finally included within the scope of these free contracts as a result of the concentrated efforts on our part to change the ingrained idea, in all areas concerned, that the work of the disabled only equals the making and selling of “things.”

◆ Employment of persons with disabilities

The history of Wadachi is characterized by its constant challenge to find employment possibilities for disabled people who have been excluded from the public work force. “Despite ten or more company interviews, I couldn’t get a job.” “Even if I tried to enter a school to upgrade my work skills, I was turned away at the door because ‘I can’t take care of myself.’” These are the voices of *Shoin* who have come to Wadachi. In the 20 years since the establishment of Wadachi Workshop, only a very few *Shoin* have been able to leave Wadachi to join the general work force and their selection was based on their relatively mild disabilities rather than on their work skills. Then, at the time when the economic “bubble” burst, several of these workers were laid off in the resultant restructuring of companies. Experiencing the return of some of these workers to Wadachi, we have felt more deeply the bitter reality of the common saying, “The rate of disabled workers who lose jobs is greater than that of those who gain jobs.” As a result, from that time we came to put less emphasis on trying to find jobs in the general work force.

However, with the enforcement of the new Japanese law to support the independence

of people with handicaps (*Shogaisha-Joiritsu-Shien*) law and the revision of the law to promote employment of the disabled (*Shougaisha-Koyou-Sokushin law*), government began a major change in moving away from a welfare-based policy of assistance to the disabled toward an employment-based policy of assistance. At Wadachi, *Shoin* have left Wadachi to take jobs in the general work force. Those who can do the work are the ones who have been selected, so we cannot help but feel that we at Wadachi have come to a kind of turning point.

The time when companies could just pay the penalty fee for not hiring people with disabilities has passed, and we can feel that companies are now beginning in earnest to take the employment of the disabled into consideration. Recently, the number of consultations we have received concerning employment of workers with handicaps has rapidly been increasing. However, in these consultations we tend to hear in unison that the people with disabilities who are sent to Hallo Work (a governmental agency that provides information about employment) to find work are not the kind of people of talent that companies desire. We at Wadachi therefore feel the great gap in “the person in a wheelchair” that employers seem to desire and the reality of people with disabilities. The type of worker with disabilities that business employers are looking for have mostly already been hired, leaving behind those persons with disabilities who require some kind of assistance but who are still looking for employment.

Our vision for the future of Wadachi is that we make the most of our experience in creating a supportive work environment for people with disabilities of all kinds, especially people with severe disabilities, and continue to have people with disabilities themselves make the suggestions for a desirable work environment.