

PATHWAYS OF CHANGE

COOL BIZ AND THE RECONDITIONING OF OFFICE ENERGY DEMAND

Key points

- In 2005 the Ministry of Environment of Japan introduced Cool Biz, an initiative designed to reduce carbon emissions by changing office dress codes, letting indoor temperatures rise to 28°C and reducing the energy used for air-conditioning.
- Cool Biz is now widely recognised as an impressively effective policy, reportedly avoiding between 1 and 3 million tons of carbon emissions every year.
- Unlike most behavior change policies, Cool Biz transformed office culture and working practices. It did not have effect by transforming the environmental consciousness of Japanese office workers: rather, it transformed the world in which they worked.
- This experience shows that governments can promote less energy intensive practices and that this does not depend on persuading individuals to adopt 'energy saving' behaviours, one by one.

Introduction

Energy demand became an issue for Japan's energy policy after the first oil shock in 1973. As in other countries the response was to focus on technological innovation and improvements in energy efficiency. So-called 'behaviour change' measures were also implemented, and some focused on the proliferation and increasing use of air-conditioners in offices. In the 1970s and again in the 1990s, the government asked office workers to limit air conditioning and adopt what was called an 'energy saving style' which involved wearing something like a 'Safari suit' (short sleeved jacket and shirt). These appeals had little or no effect.

By contrast, the Cool Biz initiative, launched in 2005 was a remarkable success: business culture and dress code changed, indoor summer temperatures were allowed to rise to 28°C and energy demand and carbon emissions were reduced. To find out how Cool Biz worked, we analysed various written sources (official documents, reports, advertising materials) and conducted 31 interviews with policy makers, office workers and experts in Japan's climate change policy.



Questions

- How did Cool Biz succeed in changing office workers' 'behaviours' when previous attempts failed and when similar 'behaviour change' policies had only limited effect?
- What does the example of Cool Biz tell us about how policy interventions might reduce energy demand?
- What are the limitations of Cool Biz and what can we learn from these?

Findings

Our research suggests that Cool Biz worked for four main reasons.

First, policy makers in the Ministry of the Environment learned from previously unsuccessful attempts to change practices of cooling and clothing at work. These experiences showed that social practices and dress codes cannot be changed at will. Policy makers recognized that awareness raising and persuasion were unlikely to have much effect and that the challenge was to modify collective conventions of office work and office wear.

Second, Cool Biz worked because it approached the transformation of office practices from multiple angles. The government required thermostats to be set at 28°C in all its buildings, and banned male public sector employees from wearing jackets and ties from June 1st to September 30th. The Prime Minister, Junichiro Koizumi, was personally involved, appearing in public and in the media in a short-sleeved shirt with no jacket and no tie. Yuriko Koike, the Minister of the Environment, worked with stakeholders in the textile and fashion industries and obtained the support of the Japan Business Federation. This strategy resulted in the 'Cool Biz' brand, and in the organisation of a fashion show with the CEOs of 13 famous Japanese companies.

Third, and unlike previous efforts to introduce the 'energy saving suit', Cool Biz was strongly associated with trends that were already underway – in fashion, in the casualization of business life, and in the very idea of being 'cool'. In 1995 Itochu Corporation, together with several other major firms, imported the concept of 'Casual Friday' from the United States. By 2005, when Cool Biz was introduced, casual dress codes were already 'normal' in sectors like the media and advertising.

Fourth, interviews with male office workers suggest that Cool Biz worked for a set of pragmatic reasons. Because they were no longer obliged to wear a jacket and tie, they were cooler and more comfortable when moving around outside the office or when commuting to work. Some also appreciated the more 'casual atmosphere'. For office culture to change, office workers had to adapt and enact 'Cool Biz' on a daily basis. Different strategies emerged: in the early days, some still wore a jacket and tie when they met with new business partners and clients, and some kept a tie in their pocket, just in case. These habits shifted as Cool Biz took hold.

Significance

Although hailed as a success, Cool Biz is limited on several counts. One is that Japanese building design codes and temperature set points have not been revised in line with Cool Biz: buildings are still designed and optimised for 22°C, and for a population dressed in suits. This reflects limited coordination between the Ministry of the Environment, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (in charge of energy policy) and the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, which is responsible for buildings and construction standards. Related to this, Cool Biz was developed within the Ministry of the Environment which has no jurisdiction over economic and energy issues. Cool Biz involved much more than a simple 'behaviour change' program, but its impact remains partial because it was, and still is, positioned and understood in these terms.

Implications

- Governments can foster carbon reductions through their own actions: through rules and standards applied to their own building stock and to public sector employees. The public sector has enormous potential for leverage, and for developing and circulating 'new' practices. This is relevant for the reproduction and the transformation of ideas about 'normality': not only 'normal' dress codes, but also about 'normal' working hours, 'normal' interpretations of comfort and 'normal' diets (high and lower carbon meals).
- The Japanese Ministry of Environment made connections between the fashion industry and climate change politics, and between concepts of 'coolness', modernity and energy demand reduction. The lesson here is that energy policy makers could and should connect with 'non-energy' policies and with relevant actors from across the private sector.
- The history of Cool Biz shows that the timing of policy intervention is crucial. Policy makers would do well to study the ongoing dynamics of the practices they seek to influence.
- Cool Biz shows that it is possible to facilitate the development of less energy intensive practices and promote lower carbon ways of life without necessarily convincing individuals of the importance of this goal.

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Further reading: www.demand.ac.uk/influencing-demand/#policies

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