Utilising the metaverse to provide employment support for the long-term unemployed

Fukuoka Prefecture

Background

Fukuoka Prefecture has set up four youth support stations within the prefecture to support the vocational independence of young people who lack confidence in their ability to work and have been unemployed for a long period of time. The youth support stations themselves are part of a nationwide Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare initiative, and Fukuoka Prefecture has been implementing this project in cooperation with the national government. Rather than searching for jobs straight away, the youth support stations provide extensive support to those who have been out of work for a long period of time by helping them learn communication skills necessary for work, discover their aptitudes for use during job hunting, and gain confidence through various workplace experiences. However, there are some people who have become socially withdrawn and find it difficult to leave their homes to go to youth support stations in the first place, or who find it difficult to continue to go there. The metaverse, on the other hand, does not have location restrictions, so people can receive support while they are at home. There is also the expectation that the use of avatars will help lower the psychological barriers to communication. Perhaps by using the metaverse, more long-term unemployed people can find employment and participate in society.

As there were very few precedents for this in Japan, an investigative research committee consisting of prefectural support organisations, experts and governmental agencies was established in FY 2022 to conduct an investigative research project. Committee meetings were also held in which members gave their opinions and advice on how to implement the project as well as shared information on ideas and issues related to support. After the effectiveness of the project was confirmed, full-scale implementation began in FY 2023.

Objectives

By making it possible for people to receive employment support at home, the project aims to create a society in which more young, long-term unemployed people can find employment and participate in society, and a diverse range of people can work for companies in the prefecture.

Project Outline

A dedicated support space called the 'Fukuoka Virtual Support Room' was established in the metaverse to provide employment support using avatars for long-term unemployed people, including those who have become socially withdrawn (known as *hikikomori*, or shut-ins).

(1) Employment support using avatars

In cooperation with the youth support stations and other support organisations in the prefecture, 'Individual Avatar Consultations', 'Virtual Exchange Meetings' and 'Skill Improvement Programs' are carried out in the metaverse. Connecting to support organisations from home

helps lower the psychological barriers to stepping into the real world, and by combining this with 'real-life' support, the project aims to help people move forwards efficiently and effectively with their careers.

(2) Work experiences using the metaverse

Work experiences are provided in the metaverse for those who cannot leave their homes and do not wish to receive 'real-life' support.

Features and Advancement

People who are not comfortable with face-to-face communication can use avatars to receive employment support without showing their faces.

Results of the Project

The use of avatars has been shown reduce the hurdles for those who are not comfortable with face-to-face communication, allowing them to actively speak out and take the first step forwards.

(1) A case of a person whose motivation and confidence regarding employment increased, and they found employment

After graduating from university, this individual found a job, but they were not good at speaking, so they started receiving support via the Fukuoka Virtual Support Room. Using the 'Avatar Individual Consultations' and 'Virtual Work Experience', they realised that they could have very relaxed conversations if they used an avatar. They wanted to take the national civil service examination, and as a result of conducting interview practice in the Fukuoka Virtual Support Room, they successfully passed with flying colours.

(2) A case of a person who had been a *hikikomori*, or shut-in, for more than 10 years finally finding employment

Originally, this individual used a youth support station, but they were not good at speaking in front of people. When they could see other people's faces or expressions, they worried so much about their reactions that sometimes they could not speak at all, so they started receiving support in the Fukuoka Virtual Support Room. Interacting with other people through an avatar reminded them of the joy of communication, and they were able to advance to face-to-face meetings. Currently, they are working as a part-time lecturer for a computer course at a youth support station.

(Reference)

○ FY 2022 (Investigative Research Project)

- Total number of users: 214 people
- Total number of individual consultations: 139 (actual number of people: 27)
- Number of people who have decided on their career paths: 8

○ FY 2023

- Total number of users: 233 people
- Total number of individual consultations: 162 (actual number of people: 25)
- Number of people who have decided on their career paths: 19

Issues and Response

Compared to face-to-face communication, it is difficult to sense the degree of direct understanding from individual statements. With face-to-face communication, you can tell this from facial expressions, but with an avatar, you cannot tell unless they clearly state 'I understand' through chat or voice. As some people are not familiar with the operation of the system, staff members try to proceed with conversation more carefully than an in-person one.

Also, the effects of the operating environment, such as the communication conditions and the computer specifications, has an unavoidable impact on the issue. Although staff members provide support, it is sometimes difficult for participants to use computers depending on their environment. Computers have been installed in the youth support stations so that the service can be accessed from there.

Future Developments (expected effects, project vision and issues)

The consultation room within the Fukuoka Virtual Support Room can be used by public support organisations and *hikikomori* support organisations in the prefecture to provide consultation support. We hope that more support organisations will use the Fukuoka Virtual Support Room in the future.

URL Reference

https://www.pref.fukuoka.lg.jp/contents/metaverse-fukuoka05.html

Contact

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Meaning of Terms Used

• 'Real-life' support—support that is provided face-to-face by a consultant.