

The Change in Young People and Work

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1. Introduction

Today, I will be talking about the changes in young people's work in Japan. In doing so, I will discuss four points: First, I will describe how the working styles of young people and their circumstances have changed. Next, I will examine the discourse associated with this change. Then, I will give an explanation for the rapid change in the working style of young people. Finally, I will propose some measures we need to take in order to improve the working conditions of young people.

2. The Change in the Working Styles of Young People

I will begin by discussing the change in the working styles of young people. Before getting into the discussion, let me clarify the difference between two types of employment: regular employment and non-regular employment. "Regular employees" refer to permanent though not necessarily lifetime workers. "Non-regular employees" consist of part-time workers, temporary workers and contract workers. Since the 1990s, among young people, regular employment has decreased while non-regular employment has increased. Regardless of employment classification, regular and non-regular employees are both experiencing difficulties in their working conditions.

First, non-regular employees are subject to challenging circumstances. The path leading to regular employment opportunities is narrow, which heightens anxiety levels and has a negative effect on future prospects. Not only is their employment situation unstable, but their wages are also extremely low, and they are assigned menial jobs day after day. On top of this, they are constantly required to transfer from one workplace to another, which makes it difficult to build good relationships with colleagues.

Among young people, one out of three is employed as a non-regular worker. Although many are in difficult living and working conditions, at first glance, the Japanese society as a whole seems to be rather peaceful compared to the case in France, where labor problems led to riots. However, this is only because non-regular workers in Japan are able to rely on their parents' income and savings.

70 to 80 percent of young non-regular workers are living with their parents. Their parents' financial support hides the problems of non-regular workers for now, but this will not last long. In the next few decades, when their parents pass away, low-wage workers will no longer be able to sustain their living standards. The Japanese society will have to cope with this sooner or later. Even today, those who

cannot rely on their parents, due to bad relationships with their parents or the loss of their parents, are already experiencing hardships.

Non-regular jobs are so unstable that workers can easily lose their jobs if they get sick and take a week off from work. Especially in the case of day laborers, who make very little money as it is, an absence of even a week could lead to a situation where he or she cannot pay rent. Consequently, he or she will lose that residence and become a young homeless person or a “net-café refugee,” or someone who sleeps at internet-café every night.

However, even regular workers are not as privileged as they used to be. 1993 to 2003/2004 was a decade marked by cutbacks in the hiring of regular workers. As a result, the average workload for a regular worker has increased, and they are now even required to manage the increased number of non-regular workers. Although the working hours have increased along with the workload, they are no longer promised higher wages based on seniority, something previous generations had enjoyed.

Due to a number of issues, including the adoption of performance-based pay, the diversification of working styles in a workplace, and reduced hiring of young people from the same age group, young regular workers find it increasingly difficult to find a sense of camaraderie among their colleagues. With the number of antagonistic relationships up instead, more workers have come to experience mental health issues. There are, of course, differences among regular workers’ statuses according to their companies’ sizes and business policies.

These various changes indicate that the interrelationships between the three fields of education, work, and family are no longer the same as they used to be.

3. The Changing Discourse on Young People

In my second point, I will discuss how the discourse on young people has changed over the past few decades. The changing trend in young workers has been described through the keyword “Freeter,” a term coined to refer to a freelance, part-time worker. When the term “Freeter” emerged in the late 1980s, it had the connotation of “a vibrant and free youth.” By the late 1990s, however, “Freeter” came to mean “a young person who is pathologically going nowhere.” Because of such an image of a “Freeter”, young people were blamed for their own employment problems.

The term “NEET,” the acronym for young people who are “Not in Education, Employment or Training,” has spread widely throughout Japan since 2004. The Japanese usage of NEET is different from that in Britain, where the term originated. In Japan, the term NEET provokes an image of a “young person lacking the motivation to work.” The understanding that most Japanese NEET are born in middle class families

instead of working class families has also exacerbated such stereotypes. NEET in Japan is also defined to include a broader age group, and job seeking unemployed individuals are excluded from the definition.

I would like to enumerate five characteristics of the representations of NEET in the media. First, being NEET is regarded as a psychological or pathological problem of young people. Second, emphasis is put on the commonality between “Hikikomori,” a term referring to people who stay at home without going to school or work. Third, the responsibility of parents is often emphasized. Fourth, a NEET is stigmatized as a loser, and it has even become a derogatory term. Last, causes and solutions to the situation are often asserted without scientific basis.

In opposition to the negative term of NEET, “Ningenryoku” or “Human competence” is used to focus on the positive aspects of young people. From the late 1990s, “competence” has been used frequently in the media and policy papers. The use of “competence” is interconnected with the personal and emotional traits of a person, such as communication skills and problem solving capabilities. As a result, many people have come to believe that most problems of young people can be solved by nurturing their human competence.

However, empirical data on NEET denies such popular understandings of young people. Data shows that the popular conception of NEET as only youths without the will to work is incorrect. The major problem is that the word “NEET” is spreading a mistaken belief in regards to the current state of young people.

4. Backdrop of Working Style Changes

I turn now to account for the change in young people’s working style.

One reason is the “unfortunate coincidence” between the economic fluctuation and the uneven age balance of the population. Today, the imbalance of the working population is gradually improving. However, the working conditions for the so-called “lost generation,” those born in the 1970s and the early 1980s, continue to be a critical issue.

Another reason for the change in working styles is the transformation of industrial structures and the type of workforce required by globalization; these are “irreversible global changes.” Every country will have to cope with this continuously evolving transition.

On top of these, “the relationship between education and work peculiar to Japan” is sustaining the current working conditions of young workers. That is, Japanese schools have been reluctant to make education match occupational demands, and the periodical recruitment of new graduates is also a convention peculiar to Japan.

I consider this “relationship between education and work peculiar to Japan” the most realistic point that could be changed. This leads us to the last argument, the measures we need to take to improve the working conditions of young people.

5. Necessary Solutions

I would like to propose several measures to change “the relationship between education and work peculiar to Japan”

First, we need to make education match occupational demands from the companies.

Second, the convention of periodical recruitment of new graduates should be opened up to those who continued job seeking and those who became non-regular workers after graduation. The opportunity to become a regular worker should be open to everyone. The current situation, where those who failed to get a regular job upon graduation are treated unfavorably, needs to be resolved.

Third, the wage gap between regular and non-regular workers needs to be narrowed. The pay for non-regular workers should be improved enough so that they can attain a certain standard of living. I propose that a transitional labor market that bridges regular and non-regular workers needs to be established; this includes, for instance, a regular employment with shorter working hours, and a non-regular employment with a more stable working condition.

Fourth, more opportunities for vocational training should be prepared. This is required because the budget for vocational training in companies is currently in decline. Being a regular worker today no longer guarantees opportunities to improve one’s skill level. For non-regular workers, there are almost no opportunities for improving occupational skills. I believe that more low cost training opportunities outside companies should be provided, and institutions that cover trainees’ living expenses should be prepared.

Last, vocational guidance should be available to a wider range of young people. Up to now, vocational guidance has been limited to students at school. But today, with the increase of non-regular workers, opportunities for vocational guidance should be opened up to graduates as well.

I believe that we need to take these actions to improve the working conditions of young people.