

College Students Prefer Public Jobs

By Kim Cheong-won, Korea Times Staff Reporter 02-27-2006

When Kim Yun-sung, a 33-year-old office worker in Seoul, decided to work at a state-run organization six years ago, his university friends often made fun of him.

Kim's friends, who mostly got well-paid jobs at big banks and conglomerates, did not understand why Kim chose to work there.

Nowadays, however, the situation is totally different, Kim said, adding that his friends even envy him.

"My friends told me that they should have applied for government jobs or at state-run organizations because they are afraid of becoming the victims of private companies' restructuring plans, including layoffs," Kim told The Korea Times.

"Although I receive a lower salary than most of my friends who work at private companies, my job is stable and secure so that I don't have to worry about my future too much," he added.

Reflecting the trend, many company workers want to become civil servants in the pursuit of more secure and stable jobs, according to a recent poll.

In a survey of 1,234 employees at major domestic companies by an online job information provider, JobLink, about 26 percent said that they place top priority on job security over other things, including wage and promotion.

More than 50 percent of the respondents said they would seriously consider shifting to government jobs even though they would receive substantially lower salaries.

Another survey conducted by the University News Network showed that almost 40 percent of university students prefer working at government organizations or state-run companies.

"As the concept of 'life time employment' is disappearing, many university students choose stability instead of challenge when it comes to getting a job," said a reporter at the newspaper.

The poll of 2,013 university students across the nation showed that 39.6 percent of the respondents would like to work at government-related organizations, a sharp contrast compared with a survey in 1998 when only 8.7 percent of university students wanted government jobs.

The rate jumped to 13.9 percent in 2000, just after the 1997 financial crisis in Asian countries. After 2004, the preference for government jobs among university students is even bigger than jobs at conglomerates or foreign companies, which are tradi-

tionally considered as good jobs among job applicants.

To answer students demands for government jobs, many universities, including Korea University in Seoul, have operated some classes designed to prepare for the civic servants examination.

"Last year, I consulted for two hours with a student, who had difficulty deciding between a job at a conglomerate or one at a state-run organization," said an official at Yonsei University's employment information center.

"Finally, the student chose the state-run organization saying that the job is more stable so that he could work until his retirement age," the official added.

Many of those who already work at private companies are still dreaming of working at government jobs.

An office worker at a Japanese trading company in Seoul is one of them. The 32-year-old worker, who would like to be identified only by his family name Lee, recently enrolled at a private institution to prepare for the civic servants examination.

"I am relatively satisfied with my current job, but working as a civil servant would be good for me ultimately when considering several factors such as stability and job security," Lee said.

Some experts, however, worry that the trend could eventually weaken the competitiveness of the country.

"It is obvious that workers seek stable, secure and well-paying jobs as the majority are not adequately prepared for the post-retirement period, coupled with the country's weak social welfare system," said a research fellow at the Korea Labor Institute.

"It is not desirable for skilled employees at private companies to take less-demanding government positions for security because it significantly erodes corporate competitiveness," the researcher said.

He said that the government and companies should come up with effective measures to create an environment in which company employees can work to their full potential without worrying about job status.

"As the population ages and the birthrate falls, the Korean government should encourage more private companies to adopt the 'wage peak system' and implement other measures to keep workers in jobs as they get older," he said.