

Workers Reluctant to Assume Higher Posts

By Lee Hyo-sik, Staff Reporter

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A 43-year-old salaried worker, who identified himself by his last name Park, is not entirely happy about his recent promotion to head a marketing department at a large domestic auto company. Why isn't Park thrilled with his new position, which guarantees him a higher wage and an expense account?

"These days, it is not a good thing for salaried workers to advance to higher positions because the higher you climb the corporate ladder, the sooner you will be out on the street," he said with a sigh. Park said that his predecessor with whom he worked over the past 14 years received a pink slip on the same day that he was promoted because his predecessor failed to make it to an executive position. "I will probably follow in his footsteps and be out of work in a couple of years. I will ask to be transferred to a car dealership soon where I can learn some practical and interactive techniques that could help me set up my own business later on," he said.

In the past, salaried workers failing to get promotions were regarded as incompetent, but now remaining a salaried employee has become a survival technique in companies plagued with frequent restructuring and a tight job market. Like Park, many others prefer to keep a low profile to stay with the company as long as they can.

Korean workers used to enjoy a life-long employment system before the Asian financial crisis hit the country in late 1997. Many workers lost their jobs as companies went bankrupt, and surviving companies had to lay off employees to cut costs and stay afloat. Even after corporations got their businesses back on track, they continued to restructure frequently, laying off mostly high-cost middle and high-level managers to stay competitive.

As more older workers were forced to quit, the ages of company executives also declined. According to the Korea Exchange, the country's stock market operator, the average age of executives at listed firms decreased to 52.7 at the end of last year from 54.7 in 2001. The exchange said the average age of 1,300 executives at Samsung Group, Korea's largest conglomerate, dropped to 47.5 in 2005 from 48.3 a year earlier, while that of the SK Group stood at 45.5.

Meanwhile, a growing number of workers are studying foreign languages or enrolling in private

learning institutes to acquire a wide array of licenses and certificates to prepare for an uncertain future. A 38-year old assistant manager at a major domestic brokerage, who wanted to be named as only Kang, said that she goes straight to a library after work to do assignments for the evening graduate courses she has been taking since March last year. "If I finish all the courses at this two-year educational graduate school next February, I will receive a teaching certificate to teach English at the nation's public schools," Kang said. "I decided to pursue a teacher's license in advance to ride out any unforeseen restructuring and be ready for unexpected career opportunities," she said. Kang said she used to think that getting a teaching license was no big deal, but now she thinks that being a public school teacher is the best option for her in a tight and unstable job market.

In the pursuit of more secure and stable jobs, many company workers want to become civil servants. 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 priorities on job security over other things, including wage and promotion. Over 50 percent of respondents said they would seriously consider shifting to government jobs even though they would receive substantially lower salaries.

"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 Kim Jeong-han, 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," he 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," Kim said.

leehs@koreatimes.co.kr