

Japan's youth showing different work attitude

BY SHARON MOSHAVI

c.2000 The Boston Globe

TOKYO — Sporting long, flashy sideburns and a T-shirt that reads “Sorry Mum and Dad,” Masato Nagata is the first to admit he’s on his way to becoming a “free-ta.” Literally “free person,” a freeta is the Japanese version of a slacker — and an increasingly common word used to describe Japanese youths.

Nagata expects to graduate from his university in March but hasn’t begun looking for a job, something Japanese students traditionally wrap up by the end of their junior year. He has no idea what he wants to do, although he certainly knows what he doesn’t want: a job at a large corporation, like the auto parts manufacturer where his father works. “I can’t go to work every day and wear a blue suit. It’s not for me,” said Nagata, 22. He plans to keep his part-time job as a truck driver’s assistant until he can think of something better to do.

In many ways, Nagata exemplifies a new era in Japan that is witnessing the fall of the “salaryman” and the rise of the slacker. Increasingly, many youths see work as the enemy and are opting out. Few want to mimic the lives of their fathers, toiling for decades at the same job at the same company. That attitude is being fueled by the decay of Japan’s economic safety net. Good jobs are scarce, and the guarantee of lifetime employment, or *shushinkoyo*, is disappearing, as corporations are forced to face hard realities. In the past few weeks, Nissan, Japan Airlines, and telephone giant NTT have all announced layoffs.

So what’s the point, Japanese youths are asking, of dedicating their lives to drudgery if they aren’t rewarded with security? Yasushi Okayama, a junior at Tokyo’s prestigious Waseda University, is one of a dozen students sitting at computers provided at the college’s career library. But instead of checking job postings on the Web, Okayama, like most of the others, is e-mailing his friends. He hasn’t given his career much thought, he said, beyond the desire for “an easy job that will provide me enough money to sustain myself.” Of course, many Japanese youths still seek secure jobs with corporate giants, but more than one-fifth of Japanese, many of them under 30, hold part-time jobs. Applications for government jobs, long considered prestigious, are falling dramatically. Normally, these applications rise during hard times, since other jobs are harder to find.

Young Japanese don’t seem too worried. “It’s the teachers and parents who are worried,” said Yuko Ookubo, executive researcher at Recruit Co. Ltd., a leading career center. Older Japanese do not hide their dissatisfaction with the younger generation. The media are filled with countless stories about how spoiled youths are:

loud and abrasive on the subways, responsible for rising crime. What the youths call individualism is just selfishness, older Japanese say. Today’s youths, for the most part, have experienced nothing but the good life. Despite the current economic downturn, their parents still have plenty of disposable income, which their children spend on Louis Vuitton bags, dye jobs, and platform shoes.

Compared with their American or European counterparts, Japanese youths are less ambitious, concedes Hidehiko Sekizawa, executive director of the Hakuhodo Institute of Living and Life, which conducts surveys of Japanese daily life. But Sekizawa does not think the whole generation should be written off. Its members are simply searching for a better balance between leisure and work, and a job that is fun, he said. “People used to think enjoyment was connected to the company, but now today’s youth try to find happiness and enjoyment by themselves,” Sekizawa said. And once the young find careers that interest them, Sekizawa predicts, they will work very hard. He said the Internet and the rising interest in Japanese popular culture—witness *Pokemon* — will open a window of opportunity for young people looking for work that excites them.

Even those who follow a more conventional career path seem to have a different outlook than the previous generation. Toshio Sato, a confident Waseda University senior who worked hard to land a job with a radio network, said that if he doesn’t like his work, he’ll leave after a few years. “I’d like security, but my happiness is more important,” he said.

Analysts say the rising demand for personal satisfaction at work is going to be tough for many companies to accommodate. Japanese corporations are group-oriented, with hierarchical structures. A Waseda business professor, Shunji Kobayashi, predicted, “A clash of attitudes is just beginning.”