

THE PROBLEM OF PERCEIVED DILIGENCE

by Robert Fouser

As unemployment in Japan continues to rise, the bonds of loyalty between employers and employees have begun to weaken. Large companies are more willing to lay off unnecessary workers, and workers have become more aggressive about changing jobs. The Japanese labor market is slowly moving toward a more fluid and contractual relationship between employers and employees. Changes in the labor market, however, have yet to address one of the greatest tragedies of Japanese life: excessively long working hours.

To reduce working hours, Japan has adopted some reforms, such as a two-day weekend and a greater number of public holidays, but these have had little effect on a corporate culture that values loyalty and perceived diligence. Perceived diligence is the public perception of diligence in the workplace and in society. Public perception of diligence differs from efficiency and productivity because time and output do not always correlate positively.

In Japan, perceived diligence has done little to raise productivity or economic growth in recent years. Japan invests heavily in research and development and spends far more as a percentage of GNP on public works than the United States, but lags significantly behind the U.S. in productivity. American workers produce more, but work less than Japanese workers; yet, parts of the U.S. face labor shortages as Japan struggles to keep unemployment from exploding.

The importance attached to perceived diligence in Japan is costly. Long hours tie workers to the factory and office, which inhibits spending on leisure activities or additional education. With so many hours spent in the office, many Japanese workers feel little incentive to improve their living conditions. Instead, they get by with cramped quarters, which dampens domestic demand for consumer goods. The real cost of perceived diligence, however, is human. The pressure to "show diligence" by staying late leaves people (usually men) little time with their families. Worrying about how one's diligence is perceived creates stress that affects personal relationships in the workplace and often at home. Japanese workers thus live in a tense zone that sits between the comfort of secure employment and the stressfulness of constantly having to worry about perceived diligence.

At its extreme, perceived diligence can be fatal. Last week, for example, a judge ruled that the government must pay compensation to the family of a man who committed suicide in 1985 because of stress from working 80-hour weeks. Under Japanese law, the government must compensate families of workers who die from job-related illness or injury. The link between suicide and the workplace, however, is difficult to prove, and previous attempts have failed. The court's ruling is the first such ruling on a job-induced suicide in Japan. Legal attacks on the consequences of perceived diligence are helpful in publicizing the issue, but they do not attack the complex causes of the problem: the complex mixture of Confucianism,

feudalism, and socialism that created contemporary Japanese corporate culture. With perceived diligence so entrenched, what, short of a revolution, can Japan do to improve the situation?

The lawsuit holds one answer. The wife of the man who died in 1985 fought a 14-year legal battle because, as she mentioned in an Associated Press interview last year, she did not want her husband to have died in vain. Fourteen years is too long for a legal resolution to such conflicts. Japanese courts take so long that most people do not have the emotional stamina to follow a case to conclusion.

Without access to timely legal action, workers and their unions have little leverage over employers. Unions can call a strike, but they have little influence beyond the company that they are associated with.

A faster, more efficient legal system would encourage more people to sue companies which do not fairly enforce labor laws. Over time, a legal precedent against excessively long hours would develop, and employees would gradually feel free to resist the pressures of perceived diligence.

Reforms in the educational system hold the other answer to the problem. For all its wealth, Japan spends less on education as a percentage of GNP than most other major industrial nations. Classes are large throughout the educational system, but the norm of 45 students per high school classroom is excessive. By default or design, Japanese education is still based on teacher-fronted lectures and rote memorization. There are few opportunities for the kind of discussion that encourages people to voice opinions freely.

Reducing class size and increasing opportunities for discussion would raise a generation that is more willing to openly express its opinions. It would also help foster the sense of self that is necessary to balance personal needs with those of the group or organization.

Compared with Japan, Korea has been more successful in tackling perceived diligence in the workplace. Resistance to perceived diligence grew up naturally in Korea as part of resistance to dictatorship in the 1980s. As authoritarianism weakened, Korean workers demanded more a democratic workplace that allowed them more free time. Going home to the family became a virtue, not a sign of negligence.

Productivity in Korea is still lower than Japan, and Korean companies face the same dilemma of having too many workers working long hours to produce more things than people can buy. But the hard momentum in Korea has turned against perceived-diligence-induced paranoia. The negative speech acts—refusal, complaint, and disagreement—have their benefits.