

AN EMPIRICAL STUDY ON THE COLLEGE GRADUATES' CAREER DEVELOPMENT

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Employment relations in Japan becomes flexible and uncertain in recent years. Career-related terms were widely introduced to Japan. Recent Japanese studies on career argued the responsibility of career development between the organization and individuals. This article discusses the determination of occupational choice and latter career development based on the interviews of Takasaki City University of Economics (TCUE) alumni. First, their ideals of vocational life before entering the labour market as well as their latter modification and development are examined. Second, their motivation for getting the first job is looked into. Finally, the ownership of individual career in Japanese firms is discussed by clarifying the way the interviewees become directors or leaders. The results show people engaged in a sole company have unclear career visions, but have stronger eagerness for being an ordinary salaried worker than others. Whatever one's dream is, getting a job for now would be a favourable attitude toward career development. The ownership of an employee's career still dominated by the organization could be confirmed.

Key words: career; career development; ideal job

INTRODUCTION

The root of career derives from Latin "carrus", "cursus" and "curriculum". The term "carrus" means a kind of a four-wheeled baggage wagon. The word "cursus" signifies running or rapid motion and "curriculum" indicates running or a contest in running. Nowadays, the term career becomes ambiguous. Surplus meanings of career in both popular and social science literature could be found. Most psychologists viewed career as a vocation emphasizing trait-and-factor fit (e.g., Parsons, 1909; Holland, 1973), a synchronous combination of life roles with life stages (Super, 1980). Adamson et al. (1998) justified that career primarily belonged to the person, and that the organization was no more a dominant factor that people were concerned with in the new era. Besides, some (e.g., Hall, 2002) recognized career as a concatenation of promotions, an enduring sequence of jobs, professional workers, the synchronous combination of roles throughout the whole life.

Career illustrated a given individual's entire life and work predominated over the quality of most people's life (Hall, 2002). Nowadays, more and more young people have no idea about their incoming occupational life. Parsons (1909) supposed that selecting a vocation was the greatest decision of one's life. And the ideal career choice is based on matching personal traits with job factors. And Holland (1973) assumed a person-environment fit. Super (1990) added that career decision has been incorporated with several mini-decisions in each life stage. Schein (1978) suggested that each individual has the alternative career anchor reflected throughout one's life and determined by one's talents, motivates and values. The construction on the term career could continue.

Previous Western studies on career focused on vocational choice by matching the characteristics of the environment and person. In Japan, career is just a starting issue. The administration has rein-

forced the motivation for one's job seeking with career education and counseling. Almost at the same time, the education/employment institution has requested students/employees to think about their ideal jobs and future career vision. Nevertheless, less people doubt its effect on the employee's career development in Japan. The employment practice differs from one nation to another as well as the way people develop their career in Japan varies from that in the United States, where the birthplace of contemporary career theory and practice. Still, relative long-term employment and constant in-house training would be the typical characteristics of large-sized corporations in Japan. In addition, organization-led personnel transfer also made the subordinate having mere ownership of one's career. On the other hand, some scholars (e.g., Kanai and Takahashi, 2002; Miyagi, 2003) stated career development was one's own responsibility. It means that the individual must take ownership of one's career by oneself. We wonder how the Western-style career theories can be applied to the different climate of Japan.

The former college graduates also thought about characteristics of the environment and the individual very well by themselves, visualized an explicit ideal job before job hunting, had the eagerness for being employed, acted on one's own initiative of career development. This is disputable. Most previous Western studies in career approached the topic in terms of psychology. Earlier Japanese studies of career laid emphasis on selection and promotion (e.g., Wakabayashi, 1986) as well as the issue between generalists and specialists (Nakamura, 1995; Morishima, 2004). The study on the ownership of Japanese employees' career development lacked sufficient examination. It caused us to carry out the investigation into the actual circumstances of employees' career development in Japan.

METHODS

It would be difficult to get the respondents' career-related data in detail by a questionnaire, so we decided to conduct an interview survey with each candidate for interview. Alumni living in Kanto area (Chiba, Gunma, Ibaraki, Kanagawa, Saitama, Tochigi, Tokyo, Yamanashi), excluding school-teachers and civil servants, served as the subjects of our study. All these people who graduated from 1960 to 1976 and some of their counterparts who graduated from 1977 to 1989 were the candidates for interview. Based on the data of TCUE (Takasaki City University of Economics) alumni directory (v. 2005), there were 1618 requests mailed and 1410 of all arrived between Sep. 2006 and Apr. 2007. The interviewer's resume, purposes of the research, our privacy policy and alternative schedule/location of the interview had been sent to each of the respondent with their initial permission. To keep the interviewees' privacy from their acquaintances and not to be identified, we did not ask any personal relationships from the institutions concerned, such as alumni associations, the student affairs section of the school and the faculty since the beginning of the survey. Unexpectedly, a lot of alumni who had never attended alumni meetings or related college-led activities after graduation accepted our invitation as the interviewee. Ultimately, 80 interviews were completed between Oct. 2006 and Jun. 2007.

LIMITATIONS

Using the interview data of TCUE alumni to describe the whole college graduates' career development since the 1960s might be controversial. However, people who graduated from the university between the 1960s and the 1970s in Japan were almost supposed to become the so-called white-collar employees and have higher upward mobility, differed from their high school graduate counterparts. From this point of view, the data of interviews we surveyed was capable of interpreting typified career development the most college graduates had at that time. At least, it described regional college students' experience in one's working life. Nevertheless, there is a couple of biases in our research.

First, about half of interviewees were the native of Gunma or living in Gunma because TCUE,

the college, is located in the same prefecture and moreover our sampling was limited to Kanto area. Second, TCUE was founded with the sole department of economics in 1957. The department of business administration was established as its second department seven years later, in the other words, all interviewees had majored in economics or business administration. Third, there were rare female students at TCUE in the first 15 years. Possible reasons of less female college students would have been social customs and poor household economy. Besides, most alumnae's career interrupted when they got married or pregnant. They also might have moved from one place to another to adapt their husband's needs of career. These factors added the difficulty in collecting female samples and clarifying the situation of alumnae's career development. Only 2 of all interviews completed with the alumnae through the research. In brief, the data we applied to examine Japanese career development might have been affected by the regional, departmental and gendered factors. Furthermore, continual student movement broke out in the first decade since TCUE was founded. Its disadvantage on some alumni's job hunting and career development also could not be ignored.

RESULTS

With the cooperation of TCUE alumni, there are 80 interviews completed between Oct. 2006 and Jan. 2007. Almost all of them (n=77) had graduated from 1961 to 1976, with their estimated age between 53 and 68. There were, at least, 55 interviewees of age 60 or more.

Selecting a vocation was the "greatest decision" of one's life. Ideal career choice was usually based on matching personal traits, such as abilities, resources and personality, with job factors like wages, environment to create vocational success, as stated by Parsons (1909). In Japan, current career counselors also inspire the youth with a dream of an ideal job, encourage them to look for their meaningful, interesting, challenging work. We wonder the former young people have thought about their talent and characteristics of the job environment well before entering the labour market, understood what was their ideal job when they encountered the determination of career. To clarify a discrepancy between interviewees' ideal of vocational life and the actual development at their mandatory retirement age or thereabouts, all samples were divided into three groups by their present or the latest form of employment, such as those engaged in a single firm or hired in more than one firms through the whole occupational life and those who became a self-employed business owner.

Until the point of interview, there were 24 of all respondents engaged in only one firm since entering the labour market. As Table 1 shows, only 6 of them could specify the image of their ideal job when they were college students. In contrast to interviewee No. 48 & No. 66 reached the goal of getting an ideal job, some, such as interviewees No. 34 and No. 35, modified the expectation of getting their original ideal job under the circumstances, while others failed to get their desired job at the beginning of career (like interviewees No. 16 and No. 65). On the other hand, the rest could not draw a clear vision of their future career at school, the most common answer as to one's ideal job would be to become an ordinary salaried worker somewhere. Whatever one's ideal job was, they were employed and enriched their experiences within the sole organization afterwards.

The number of the interviewees hired in more than one companies through working life was 32. As Table 2 shows, more than one-thirds (n=13) could exactly declare their ideal job well when they were college students, and only 4 of 13 interviewees' (like interviewees No. 25, No. 41, No. 52 and No. 77) had a career coinciding with their expectation of an early ideal job after graduation, while others abandoned their initial dream of the ideal job. Although the rest of their counterparts also expressed their vague figure about future career, they revealed their pure intention to become an ordinary salaried worker somewhere. The obvious characteristic of this group would be that about one-third raised to an upper position even a director whereas nearly half of them fell into atypical employment among organizations.

There were 24 persons currently working as self-employed business owners or helpers in the family business. Some of them had been employed by other organizations in their initial stage of

Table 1. Ideal job and the actual development of people who have been engaged in a single firm.

Interviewee	Ideal Job	The actual development
#16	journalist	failed after applying to major newspaper companies, got a job at a manufacturer through personal connection unwillingly
#34	diplomat, salesman in a business company or a schoolteacher	employed as a salesman of a manufacturer through personal connection, became one of the directors afterward
#35	schoolteacher or civil servant	became a public servant at an extra-government organization
#48	executive officer	developed his career of accounting at a manufacturer, rose to president
#65	schoolteacher or civil servant	got a job with a local bank, finally, promoted to a director
#66	president of a musical company	selected for promotion within the organization and achieved his goal

Table 2. Ideal job and the actual development of people hired in more than one firm.

Interviewee	Ideal Job	The actual development
#10	member of Self-Defence Forces	passed the civil service exam, had a full career in trade and industry as government official, now got a job in an association
#11	executive officer	left the first company in a half year, got another job at an electric company through personal connection, met with an traffic accident at his middle career, then quitted
#25	editor	worked as a salesman in a business company, but left it in the first year on his own initiative, had a long experience in editing for organizations
#27	schoolteacher	failed the employment test of a teacher and insurance salesman, so chose to work for a farmers' cooperative in the following 34 years, now became a general manager of a private finance initiative
#41	manager and above	got a job at one of major construction companies, had a long experience in accounting and finance, changed his job to a medical business and rose to a director afterward
#46	licensed tax accountant	found a part-time job in an accounting office, left it for nursing one of his sick relatives, hired in a small firm through personal connection, then changed his job to a construction company operated by his classmate, became director, CEO later
#49	pressman, normal salaried worker	got a position as bookkeeper at a small telephone company taking charge of the renewal and repair, changed his job to construction companies, a business company, a food company, temporary staff agency and so on
#52	sport correspondent	employed as an editor by one of the newspaper companies, transferred to a reporter with his supervisor's permission, inducted into the secretariat of professional sports
#56	employee of a securities company	got a job with a local credit association, then worked as a salesman at a foreign-affiliated computer company, changed his job to another computer company through a former colleague, promoted to director
#59	actor	got a sale job in a cosmetic company, quitted it 2 decades later, started a business as a consultant, became part-time teacher in a junior college and associate professor in another university through his personal connection
#67	schoolteacher	got a bookkeeper job at a construction company, had a long experience in accounting and finance, rose to director, quitted because of depressed sale, now worked as temporary staff
#76	judge	got a job at construction company through personal connection, assigned to other allied real estate business, dismissed by his declined business performance, hired by a gardening company, and then started business in gardening later but failed, now worked as a contract worker
#77	civil servant	passed the civil service exam, had a long career in accounting as a government official, later transferred to related associations and a private company

career, and others devoted themselves to the family business before/after their graduation and then inherited the family business from their parents or the relatives sooner or later. More than half of them (n=13) represented their prospects for the future clearly, and 7 in 13 interviewees accomplished their dream. Also, the rest of others did not have an explicit ambition of making a successful career, and they became the president of a firm by starting their own business or inherited their family business from their relatives.

Then, we were curious to know what were they working for. Some studies (e.g., the Cabinet Office, 2003) indicated that the young of today lacked of eagerness to live a worthy life. Meanwhile, we wondered why the former college graduates went to get their first job. The response to our question " Why didn't you choose a part-time work or just hang out every day without working, but decided to get employed (as an ordinary salaried worker) at that time? " could be basically divided into two patterns.

Some replied that they had grown up in a single parent family (e.g., interviewees No. 14, 21, 27, 29, 34, 40, 42, 56 and 67), had a large number of siblings of 4 and over (e.g., interviewees No. 14, 36, 52, 55, 66 and 77), borne in a relatively necessitous family (e.g., interviewee No. 2, 10, 16, 17, 33, 38, 52, 56, 58, 59, 63 and 77), needed to pay back his scholarship since the graduation. In other words, they clearly understood that getting earnings for himself or his family as soon as possible was

Table 3. Ideal job and the actual development of people who became self-employed business owner.

Interviewee	Ideal Job	The actual development
#1	entrepreneur	found a part-time job in a certified tax accountant office, started a business as a managerial adviser
#4	president	employed in one of major electric manufacturers through his teacher, left his job because of dissatisfaction with massive personnel reduction, started his business under local a government's assistance
#8	president	employed in his family's construction company, gained experience in several positions, rose to president
#9	scientist	worked for his family business, his relative's business, later got a job at a construction company, started his real estate business
#24	president	got a job at one of major printing companies through personal connection, inherited a sewing business from his father, opened a new store recently
#26	pilot	found a part-time job in a small factory through personal connection, hired at a sports goods, factory, sports shop, department store, quitted for the rejection of transference, became an apprentice 2 years later, inherited the family business from his mother
#42	president	got a job at a chemical company, left it due to a long-standing labour dispute, employed at a major real estate agency, rose to director and CEO later, retired and started his real estate business
#47	schoolteacher	employed at an office equipment company, rose to director, retired and started his business in consumable goods and the like
#53	marketing expert	got a sale job in a cosmetic company, had a long experience in sales and marketing, promoted to deputy manager, retired and started his business as a marketing consultant
#64	scholar	employed by a credit union, left his job one and a half decades later, got a bookkeeper job through personal connection, rose to director
#73	salesman in a business company	worked for his family business, inherited a consultant business from his father
#74	licensed tax consultant	entered a technical college in bookkeeping after graduation, got a job at an accounting office, practiced as a licensed tax consultant after passing the certificate exam
#80	salesman in a business company	employed by one of major department stores, got a job taking charge of land development planning at a real estate agency by headhunting, later started his land development business

essential for their livelihood, because they encountered more economic difficulties than their counterparts at school. To be employed as a salaried worker or to devote themselves to the family business was one of their stable choices. Incidentally, almost all of them had worked as part-time workers for a long time in the campus life.

Despite the fact that the rest of other interviewees were not pressed for employment, most of them (e.g., interviewee No. 3, 4, 12, 13, 19, 23, 24, 25, 28, 30, 31, 35, 37, 41, 44, 45, 47, 48, 49, 51, 54, 57, 60, 62, 64, 68, 69, 70, 71, 75 and 79) regarded working after graduation as one's obligation to themselves, their parents and even the society they lived in. "No pain, no gain" was also the respondents' common statement about one's philosophy of working life.

Hall (1996) indicated that career became protean, and it would not be driven by the organization, but by the individual. Noer (1995) explained that the relationship between the labour and management under the protean career contract became more equal and task-focused (pp. 176-177). Littleton et al. (2000) argued that a shift from bounded careers to boundaryless careers was increasingly common. However, Inoki (2001) showed that most employees in Japan desired to enrich their human resource with a related job or different work in their current company. He revealed that development of Japanese employees' career continued to rely on the organization's help and that the employees did not prefer developing their careers among organizations, but within the organization. Becoming a director of a company is a kind of measurement we estimated that one has a career. Clarifying the possibility for the former college graduates to get promoted to a director or above and who held the ownership of the individual's career on the way to the top by employment is one of our research concerns.

About half ($n=11$) of 24 respondents engaged in the sole organization had been appointed to the board. The firms interviewees No. 7, 16 and 34 served were all medium and small-sized firms. Each of them had a full career in sales before being promoted to the director. Meanwhile, interviewees No. 23, 36, 38, 48, 55, 58, 65 and 66 worked for relatively large-sized corporations and rose to the director once in a subsidiary or affiliated company. Most of them experienced several job functions, only a few stayed in sole specific job function through their careers. Based on their description of their employment history, from recruitment, placement, advancement to retirement, the human resource division had absolute initiative of making personnel reshuffle. College graduates had mere ownership of their own careers in the past decades, to be exact, they did not interpret one's ownership of career development as their belongings. All what they had done was working harder and harder. Until today, they still believe one will get its rewards or/and promotion after devoting oneself to the company.

There were also some opportunities for people hired in more than one firms to be promoted to the director and above. Over one-third ($n=12$) had had been appointed to the board. Only interviewees No. 13, 17, 67 rose to the director in the first company, others became the director in their second (e.g., interviewee No. 18, 41, 44 and 62), third (e.g., interviewees No. 27, 56 and 61) and the following company (e.g., interviewees No. 46 and 49). In addition, only interviewees No. 44 and 56 promoted to the director at a larger, foreign-affiliated company, the rest of them tended to move to more local, small-sized firms when they got newer jobs. According to their common statement, they also had mere ownership of their careers, like personnel reshuffle and advancement. The way they exercised their ownership of career development was limited to getting a new job somewhere.

DISCUSSION

Choosing a vocation is regarded as the greatest decision in one's life. In the reality, less people tended to think about their ideal job well by taking into account one's characteristic of personality and the environment they face before entering the labour market. The decision concerning one's first job seems to be made by chance and destiny, so does one's later career development. In contrast with the current young people choosing to be employed as part-time workers, or staying at home as the

unemployed for seeking one's meaningful, interesting and challenging work, the former graduates used to be employed as salaried workers somewhere at first whatever the decision making was based on one's initiative or under a realistic pressure. Those interviewees having ambition for the ideal job abandoned it afterward when they faced the harsh world. Only few of them kept pursuing their ideal job in the journey. According to our interview results, the lesser one aimed at a specific job or occupation, the higher was possibility one stayed in the sole company. Serving for only one organization during one's working life was usually appreciated in Japan. This does not mean not to care about one's future career. To be accurate, not to set a limit on one's feasibility of career, but doing one's best to coordinate with the environment and to modify one's career goal and vision constantly would be a surefooted way to develop one's career in the society. Instead, the opinion encouraging the young people to seek one's meaningful, interesting, challenging work might be discourage one from making a great discovery of its own true career anchor even spending one's whole life.

Plenty of interviewees got the first job for earning a livelihood. Others thought getting employed is the responsibility of oneself, one's family and even the society. As mentioned above, they had rare choices to work as part-time workers or to be the unemployed after graduation, not like the present-day freeters or the so-called NEET. However, today's parents admit that their child/children could stay home with them as long as the child/children like, without secure employment, especially as those hired as part-time workers or under the unemployment. Almost all interviewees became regular full-time workers because of lesser vacant positions for part-time workers before the deregulation of labour codes and other labour-related legislation based on their familiar comments. Tacit approval of atypical employment as well as rapid declining employment of regular full-time workers may deprive one of the opportunity to enrich its human resource, and leave the individual with the illusion of about career. From the viewpoint of interviewees, career could not be planned, prepared and predicted. It always moved in an uncontrolled way in an uncertain direction. As Mitchell et al. (1999) introduced, people could generate and incorporate unexpected happenstances into their career development beneficially, e.g., in case of taking unplanned events as learning opportunities. Several of our interviewees mentioned themselves as instances of approaching the end of working life with one's career becoming near completion. It could be a profession, a series of occupations or jobs depending on one's experiences. The ultimate purpose of getting one's first job after the graduation, even achieving one's career would be as simple as earning a livelihood.

The ownership of career is a fundamental issue of career study. In spite of the traditional viewpoint of the Japanese employees' career dominated by the organizations, the contemporary career theories inspired people to build their own career through organizations. Based on our survey, the employed workers whatever they are engaged in the sole firm or hired among companies seem to have mere determination of the career. To keep steady employment and continuous promotion in the Japanese firms, hard working and obeying the personnel orders would be the minimum requirement. Especially, those who developed their career in the sole company had a high probability of rising to the director. Nevertheless, serving more than one company reduced one's potential for being a director at a relative large-sized corporation. Change of jobs does not guarantee improving one's career under the practice of Japan's labour market. Moreover, it might take a risk with regard to one's prospective promotion and wage increase as our interviewees revealed. Taking the data of the Basic Survey on Wage Structure (MHLW, 2006) as an example, people choosing to manage their own career in another organization could not avoid to suffer the loss of earnings at approximately 15% at the age of 35 while as their counterparts encountered economic disadvantage at 20%, 25% when they quitted under age 45 and 55, respectively, compared with their fellow workers choosing not to move. Difficulties in achieving one's career as a regular worker at a single firm would be predictable. To be employed as a full-time worker after the graduation and enhancing one's experiences in the same organization has been recognized as a prevailing way to develop an organization-oriented career.

CONCLUSION

The results of the study indicate that people having served for only one company had a comparatively unclear goal of following their working life, but had stronger eagerness for being an ordinary salaried worker than those hired among organizations and self-business owners. About one-third of interviewees were forced to get their earnings as soon as possible by economical factors. Most of the rest regarded working after the graduation as one's obligation to oneself and the surroundings. One's career might be determined by various factors. However, working hard, following the personnel orders and staying in the current company, if possible, would be the royal road to rise to the director position or above. None of employed interviewees replied "I know what my employer wants my next job to be". Since the organization's human resource division absolutely dominated the subordinate's ownership of career development, it seems not necessary to visualize one's ideal job and the vision of career before working in Japanese companies. Trying one's best to modify one's career goal with the organizational one would be a better solution. Encouraging employees to pursue their ideal work, to keep seeking for the ideal work would tend to obstruct one's development of career instead.

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