
INTRODUCTION

Occupational Awareness and Career Guidance for Youths

Within the realm of conventional education in Japan, there has been a prolonged tendency to stress the importance of the career guidance approach. Under this approach, students make their choices based on academic standards of test deviation values and scholastic ability, rather than emphasizing their interests or individuality. The result has been a lack of awareness regarding the importance of encouraging self-understanding and a firm grasp of occupational matters.

In recent years, however, Japan has encountered a serious social problem in the form of growing numbers of young people who find themselves unable to determine their own future, despite entering adolescence. They continue to work at non-regular jobs after graduating (the so-called *freeter* category of permanent part-timers), or fall under the “NEET” definition (not in employment, education or training) following graduation. As this situation grows in scale and gravity, greater attention has been given to providing young people with more effective career education and guidance.

In 2002, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology released its “Learning Program Framework for Cultivating Occupational and Work Attitudes,” which promotes career education from an early age (including at the elementary school level). In 2003, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry and the Cabinet Office, the education ministry published “Youth Self-Reliance and Challenge Plan”. This plan is a blueprint to promote concrete policies to carry out diversified support for youth career formation. In striving to forge genuine improvements in the problems concerning the work methods and the actual employment situation for young people, it will be particularly important to zero in on the psychological aspects of people in this age group. This means confirming the development of their understanding of self and work, while utilizing career guidance by experts and other direct approaches to effectively promoting greater occupational awareness.

With this in mind, we have decided to focus this issue of the *Japan Labor Review* on the occupational consciousness of contemporary Japanese youth. We will also compile and disseminate topics relevant to the various types of support given to career education and guidance currently in use for the purpose of inspiring occupational awareness among the young.

The first article by Shu Kimura is an introduction to recent trends in policies concerning career guidance in Japan. Within that context, the issues addressed include career guidance at schools, occupational guidance from a stable government and other career guidance concepts and schemes, with the existing problems and future themes compiled for examination. The article is effective in clearly defining the aims and the specific contents of the career guidance and counseling offered by schools and job placement agencies, as well as the career counseling services that are now mandatory at business enterprises.

The Second article by Tomoko Adachi focuses on the occupational awareness of Japanese college students. Specifically, she examines tendencies such as “faith in perceived best-fit occupations,” “passivity” and “pursuit of personal preferences” as factors thought to contribute to the “career indecision” of young people today, followed by an analysis of the impact of each of these factors in a psychological light. The article also introduces the “Career Education Program,” an approach comprised of seven steps designed to promote career awareness on the part of college students, and reports on the results of this program.

The third article by Tomotsugu Kawasaki examines the approaches to career services offered by universities in Japan, focusing on the example of Kansai University (with which the author is affiliated). We learn that Kansai University has detailed services with the goal of inspiring occupational awareness in its students. The key to this program is the so-called “Career Design Room.” Kawasaki also notes that while there has been an increase in the number of universities and colleges that stress the importance of “career education” in recent years, the specific details of this arm of education differ widely in practice. The conventional role of college employment placement divisions has concentrated on getting students into job situations. Nowadays, however, it appears that greater demands are being made on these offices to expand their functions to also include support of the occupation development process.

While the papers by Adachi and Kawasaki deal with subjects concerning the awareness of college students and career guidance offered on university campuses, there has also been a push to enhance the career guidance programs at the junior and senior high school level as well. As such, we decided to include the following articles to address themes regarding specific guidance tools developed to cultivate the occupational awareness of students at those

educational levels.

The fourth article by Toru Ishii and Osamu Yoshida introduces the *Occupation Handbook for Youth* (OHBY), a guidance tool engineered to facilitate use of personal computers to aid in searching for job and occupation information. OHBY was designed with young people in their junior and senior high school years as the main users, and has a guidance system that searches detailed information on 430 vocational categories. The system is currently being used extensively at junior and senior high schools, as well as at occupational counseling centers set up to primarily target the needs of young people. This is an effective tool that is expected to meet an expanding sphere of applications from here on, and in doing so, will raise the occupational understanding of junior and senior high school students in Japan.

The final article by Harumi Muroyama & Junpei Matsumoto introduces the research using answers to the Vocational Readiness Test (VRT). The VRE is an assessment which evaluates the level of occupational interests of junior and senior high school students. This paper tries to track the current status of youth occupational interest and the changes in that interest factor that have occurred over the past decade. For its interest framework, the VRT adopts the six categories of occupational interest devised by Holland, J.L. The findings suggest a decline, especially during recent years, in the level of interest and concern (particularly among high school students) in office work and other standard activities, as well as toward administration, operations and other management levels of employment.

As noted, this issue of *Japan Labor Review* presents papers that address the problems of occupational awareness and career support of young people from college age down to junior and senior high school students. In Japan, full-fledged career guidance/education services have only just gotten off the ground. This points to an obvious need to keep a close eye on how the current budding state of career guidance evolves from here on, and how the awareness of young people in this country shifts against the backdrop of the development of this guidance. In that respect, I sincerely hope that this special edition will contribute to a greater understanding of the trends among support surrounding the occupational awareness and enlightenment of young people in Japan today.

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