
Introduction

Labor Problems Facing Intermediate-Age Workers

This Special Edition highlights the aspect of age, with particular focus on workers positioned between younger and older age groups, defined here as “intermediate-age workers.” Specifically, intermediate-age workers are those between around their mid-30s and their 40s. Our theme will be to consider labor problems typically experienced by this age group in Japan. In this country, the debate on labor policies has tended to focus on younger and older age groups in recent years. In the policy debate on these age groups, intermediate-age workers have been included for purposes of comparison, but attempts to understand this age group in itself are relatively rare. However, intermediate-age workers have many important roles to play, both as core human resources in the workplace and as providers of childcare and family care in the home. Intermediate-age workers are approaching the mid-way period in their vocational careers. For that reason, there must be typical issues faced by this age group in connection with working styles and careers, as well as contemporary issues associated with changes in the labor market. In this Special Edition, we will study these broad-ranging issues affecting intermediate-age workers in Japan from a variety of perspectives.

“Changes Experienced by Intermediate-Age Workers in Japan’s Labor Market,” a paper by Ryo Kambayashi and Yuko Ueno, examines changes in the labor market over the two decades since the collapse of the bubble economy, with particular focus on full-time workers of intermediate age between 35 and 50. The paper reveals that during this period, not only has the opportunity cost of changing careers decreased so that the fluidity of the labor market also impacts intermediate-age workers, but competition for promotion to management posts in internal labor markets may also have intensified. For their analysis, the authors created a panel dataset for business establishments by linking microdata from the Basic Survey on Wage Structure and the Survey on Employment Trends. This was used to make an empirical study of the relationship between rewards for promotion to management and reassignment ratios, with the result that a generally positive correlation was found between the two. These changes are consistent with the rank-order-tournament theory. It can therefore be confirmed that, even among intermediate-age workers, regarded as the core of Japanese employment practices, the structure of promotion is not entirely unrelated to changes in the labor market. However, the analysis presents the possibility that competition for promotion to department manager is still mainly between lifetime employees who had entered their companies in their youth, and not against externally hired employees. This suggests that changes experienced in the labor market are also diverse among intermediate-age workers, depending on the stage of career advancement and age. Consequently, the authors point out that it is difficult to explain the situation facing intermediate-age workers consistently just by using a simple model.

What sort of roles are intermediate-age workers expected to play within corporate organization, and what kind of issues do they face in performing those roles? Sumiko Ebisuno, Sakae Oguma and Yasuo Murasugi attempt to answer these questions in “Current Status and Issues Facing Employees of Intermediate Age in the Workplace: From the Perspective of Labor-Management Relations.” In this paper, the authors clarify the actual situation and issues associated with the working styles of intermediate-age employees (aged 35–49) in workplaces significantly impacted by workplace age composition. The paper highlights situations in which employees of intermediate age are so busy that their communication with other generations becomes inadequate and they have no time to cultivate the next generation, through analysis based on a questionnaire survey and an interview survey with company unions and others. Against this background, the authors study the relationship between workplace classification based on the relative proportion of intermediate-age employees and the age composition of workplaces, confirming as a result that shortages of both younger and older employees cause an excessive work burden on employees of intermediate age. They also point out that the excessive work load on intermediate-age employees causes problems not only in their own work performance but also in connection with passing on skills and developing human resources in workplaces and companies. As an example of workplaces where steps to correct this kind of problem have been taken, cases in which older workers aged 60 or over give support to intermediate-age employees are introduced. On this basis, the authors assert that it is important to maintain an appropriate age composition by constantly hiring new graduates, as a radical measure aimed at solving problems arising from the increased workload on employees of intermediate age. And to this end, they assert that it will be essential to have dialog between labor and management on appropriate numbers for recruitment—currently a rare practice in labor relations within Japanese companies.

Intermediate-age workers are also at an age when burdens of childcare and care for elderly family members are concentrated. In Japan, particularly in recent years, finding a balance between caring for family members and work commitments is causing conflicts between work and care for an increasing number of both men and women, given progressive population aging. Based on this perception, in “Work-Life Conflict in the Intermediate Age Bracket: Trends in Working Hours and Time Spent Caring for Elderly Family Members,” Sachiko Kuroda uses microdata from the Survey on Time Use and Leisure Activities to observe long-term trends in the distribution of working time and private time by people in the intermediate age bracket (30s–50s) who work as regular employees while also having responsibilities such as caring for elderly family members and raising children. According to the author’s observations, while the actual number of intermediate-age workers who work as regular employees and take care of elderly family members is rapidly increasing, the time spent giving care by these workers has been decreasing over the last decade, regardless of where they give the care and whether or not they receive assistance from others. On the other hand, working hours for both male and female regular employees in the inter-

mediate age bracket are in an increasing trend; over the last 15 years, in particular, the working hours of people who take care of elderly family members have markedly increased. On the reason for the decrease in caregiving time, the possibility that social support has developed with the introduction of Long-Term Care Insurance may be suggested in some cases, but there is insufficient explanation for the significant decrease in caregiving time over the last ten years. In the paper, the author stresses the need for further analysis in future on reasons for the decrease in caregiving time, partly from the perspective of reviewing the system of Long-Term Care Insurance in Japan.

As these analyses show, workers of intermediate age also face problems in terms of work-life balance. In “Study on Legal Issues Involving Intermediate Age Brackets: Aiming to Facilitate Work-Life Balance,” Toshiko Kanno considers what sort of action appears to be addressing these issues in legal terms. On the premise that workers of intermediate age (mid-30s to 40s) are a family-forming generation, this paper discusses problems in terms of labor law faced by intermediate-age workers, with focus on problems in fields where there has been an accumulation of case law doctrine in Japan. The author points out that workers in intermediate age groups are prone to face problems that arise when taking long-term leave and after their return to work, in terms of following a working life while coping with the changing needs of family life. Meanwhile, the current problem of non-regular employment in Japan is seen as one that also faces intermediate age groups. Specifically, workers currently in their 30s are in a generation that has experienced periods of difficulty in finding employment when they were younger, given a situation in which it is difficult for workers of any age to obtain regular employment opportunities. Based on this kind of perception, the author divides the problems facing intermediate-age workers into four types—problems related to leave and disadvantageous treatment, problems related to reassignment, problems related to promotions and upgrades, and problems of non-regular workers. Trends in Japanese case law are studied for each of these.

As outlined above, this Special Edition focuses on workers in intermediate age groups, and studies the realities and issues of the working styles and careers of these workers in Japan. The discussions in these papers present a profile of people in intermediate age groups faced with contemporary issues regarding the formation of careers within an organization, the fulfillment of roles in the workplace, and the balance between work and childcare or family care, amid an era of progressive birth rate decline, population aging and changes in the labor market. The importance of further empirical and theoretical research on intermediate age groups and discussion based on this is suggested. Moreover, the various discussions cause one to realize the importance of a perspective of understanding intermediate age groups in terms of their relationship with other age groups. This is because they are positioned at a transitional point in vocational lives linking younger and older age phases, and are responsible for the passing on skills to the next generation.

Of course, there are many issues that could not be fully taken up in this Special Edition. Indeed, the papers assembled in this Special Edition point out that there are still re-

search issues that remain to be addressed in their respective research fields. Nevertheless, I hope that this Special Edition will provide an impetus for readers to turn their interest to the breadth of problems facing people in intermediate age groups in Japan. Among these problems, some must surely be shared by intermediate-age workers in societies other than Japan, as an age group expected to bear many important roles both at work and in the home.

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