

Career Change Among Non-Selective Japanese College Graduates: Analysis of An Interview Survey

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Abstract

An interview survey was conducted among 15 college graduates working as skilled contract employees under non-regular employment at four plants operated by major manufacturers in order to determine the status of career change in an era wherein university placements exceed the number of university applicants. The results revealed that most participants graduated from non-selective colleges with deviation scores ranging between 30 and 40, thereby decreasing their competitive edge in the job market when compared to high school graduates. Most of the participants held various positions in different industries, and initially possessed low levels of job satisfaction; moreover, their change activities were inadequate.

Key Words: *Career Change Among College Graduates, Non-Selective Colleges, Skilled Contract Employees, Non-Regular Employment.*

Introduction

In the past, college graduates envisioned working for stable, large-scale corporations as white-collar employees. Nevertheless, this image is becoming less feasible as we enter an era wherein university placements exceed the number of university applicants due to increased access to higher education. Not all college graduates are experiencing this problem, however, such as those who have earned degrees from so-called *prestigious* institutions. In contrast, individuals who have obtained diplomas from less distinguished institutions (e.g., mid-sized or non-selective colleges in which entrance examinations are not required) are relegated to non-regular employment, or forced to work for untrustworthy entities.

This study attempts to identify employment trends among graduates from non-prestigious institutions whose career paths deviated, as a matter of necessity, from traditional expectations. To examine this issue, an interview survey was conducted comprising 15 participants working as skilled contract employees at four plants operated by different major manufacturers. We begin by exploring relevant statistics and the results of other surveys, in addition to prior studies, in order to highlight issues that should be addressed by this research. This is followed by an examination of the career opportunities available to recent college graduates by reviewing the results of our interview survey. The paper concludes by discussing ways in which career and/or vocational education can aid recent graduates from non-selective/non-prestigious colleges in obtaining employment.

Literature Review

During the 1980s, the advancement rate of Japanese high school students to four-year and junior colleges reached 36-37%. Deregulation in the 1990s spawned what would later be referred to as the "age of

commercialization” (Amano, 2003). It was at this time that college enrollment limits were revised; likewise, the criteria for establishing colleges also changed. Consequently, advancement rates rose to 50% in the late 2000s. Nevertheless, many four-year and junior colleges began to suffer from low enrollment due to declining birthrates, thereby ushering in an era wherein university placements exceeded the number of university applicants.

It should be noted that the aforementioned increases in college advancement rates were not unique to the 1990s: advancement rates also rose significantly during the 1960s, before leveling off following the 1979 energy crisis. It was during the final years of this era that the baby boomer generation began to enter the workforce; many of these individuals subsequently obtained professional employment at large corporations, and thrived in a stable economy, thereby altering the career landscape for future white-collar college graduates. Whereas college graduates in the past were viewed as generalists possessing experience in multiple fields, subsequent generations found themselves fulfilling roles once relegated to high school graduates, who were no longer being hired by major corporations (Koike, 1991).

Imada and Hirata (1995) examined career advancement at a major Japanese steel and engineering company; they discovered that, among college graduates, seniority and a pyramid-like organizational structure were key causes of disparity in promotion. Among high school graduates, however, disparity in promotion was primarily attributable to insufficient qualifications. Hence, as the number of college graduates employed by a corporation increases, opportunities for high school graduates decrease. Indeed, the ever-increasing number of college graduates in a presently stagnant economy hinders the ability of large corporations to provide employees with opportunities for advancement as they did in the past. Consequently, many college graduates are forced to seek non-regular employment, or to work for untrustworthy entities. Statistics published by the Japan Institute for Labor Policy and Training (2014) suggest that the number of regular employees has reached its highest rate in recent history. Nevertheless, from 2007 onward, the number of non-regular employees has continuously increased; as of 2012, 12.4% of male, Japanese college graduates were non-regular employees. The aforementioned report also indicated that the tendency for individuals uninterested in procuring employment to possess low education levels did not generally change. Among this group, however, 14.6% included holders of undergraduate or graduate level degrees—a percentage that is likely to increase.

The number of college graduates employed as blue-collar workers at manufacturing sites is also increasing—despite the fact that such positions have generally been held by high school graduates or junior high school graduates in earlier generations. For example, Park (2010) examined changes in hiring practices at plants operated by a major steel producer and a prominent machinery manufacturer. Throughout the 1990s, the steel plant maintained regular employment, and strengthened mid-career employment; consequently, approximately 40% of the plant’s mid-career employees were college, junior college, or technical college graduates. Furthermore, the academic backgrounds of employees in positions that were typically held by high school or junior high school graduates at the plant became more diversified. In contrast, the machinery plant increased its utilization of non-regular workers; as a result, mid-career positions held by non-regular employees increased. It should be noted that Park did not specifically mention which colleges the workers attended, nor their majors. Hence, we cannot ascertain whether those individuals were hoping to procure a technical rather than vocational position, such as one related to engineering.

Hirasawa (2010) examined how the position initially acquired by an individual following graduation could be affected by the rank and history of the college from which his or her diploma was obtained, in addition to academic performance. Hirasawa classified colleges on a scale of 1 to 4, wherein schools ranked fourth were deemed prestigious; these included 16 and 17 national and private colleges respectively, with deviation scores of approximately 65 or higher. Institutions at the bottom end of the scale (i.e., those with a 1 ranking) possessed deviation scores of approximately 45 or less, and included 49 schools that were founded in small cities following Japan’s period of strong economic growth. These rankings also factored

in the difficulty of each institution's entrance examination. Following this categorization, Hirasawa examined the relationship between the ranking of each participant's school and the type of employment that they procured after graduation. The results revealed significant relationships between an institution's ranking and one's initial employment opportunities, particularly among young males. Moreover, participants who graduated from colleges with a 1 ranking tended to obtain positions similar to those who attended junior and career colleges.

Igami (2010) discussed the diversification of student populations following a push to increase access to higher education, as less academically prepared individuals entered colleges without a need to pass an exhaustive entrance examination. The study examined non-selective colleges specifically, and found that many enrollees would not have met the minimum requirements needed to partake in publicly available vocational training, much less attend a university. Students often lacked interpersonal communication skills, and were therefore limited in their ability to successfully complete a job interview. Furthermore, Igami noted that students at non-selective colleges frequently lacked an understanding of social context, exhibited low self-esteem, and struggled with basic reading, writing, and mathematics; without such skills, students will not likely obtain work at a legitimate company, and will consequently settle for a less reputable employer. This is particularly problematic since these students are unaware of their rights as workers, and are therefore subject to exploitation. Based on these findings, Igami concluded that so-called *brand name* colleges tend to produce graduates capable of meeting the core demands of Japanese employers. In contrast, graduates from lesser-known institutions are more likely to obtain employment at midsize or small companies.

It is clear that future graduates will face some uncertainty in terms of their career paths—particularly among those enrolled in non-prestigious, non-selective institutions. Despite this realization, few studies have attempted to address this issue specifically. Accordingly, the present research examines the topic by analyzing a series of interviews conducted with 15 college graduates working as skilled contract employees at plants operated by four different major manufacturers.

This study focuses on skilled contract employees specifically rather than non-regular employees in general for three reasons. First, they purposely chose to work at a plant operated by a major manufacturer in hopes of becoming a regular employee by means of promotion, and therefore do not wish to remain contract employees. As such, it cannot be argued that these individuals accepted their respective positions for the sake of sustenance alone. Second, the four manufacturers that employ the study's participants are highly regarded both within their own industries and by the general public.

This is largely attributable to each corporation's enduring presence in the country, which predates or directly follows the war. Moreover, these entities possess characteristics that reflect the aforementioned shortcomings of Japanese human resource management, specifically in terms of their internal promotion systems. Third, each company has primarily placed individuals possessing either undergraduate or graduate degrees into administrative or technical staff positions since the 1970s; conversely, high school graduates were generally hired for skilled occupations. However, similar to the companies discussed in Park's research, many of these entities began to hire college graduates for both regular and non-regular skilled positions during the 1990s, while others began to do so in the 2000s.

Hence, fresh college graduates will continue to compete for managerial positions such as section chief under the current Japanese promotion system. Nevertheless, many of these individuals, including skilled contractors, will be relegated to non-regular positions, and therefore play a marginal role in corporations. Indeed, when discussing career change among college graduates, skilled contract employees with undergraduate or postgraduate degrees will continue to accept positions typically held by high school graduates.

Survey Overview

Fifteen college graduates working as skilled contract employees at plants operated by four major manufacturers located in Aichi Prefecture and the western part of Shizuoka Prefecture were interviewed. The researcher was introduced to these individuals by means of their employers or other related partiesⁱ. An overview of the participants' demographics is provided in Table 1. The interviews were semi-structured in nature, and lasted between 30 to 60 minutes. Individuals who dropped out of college or worked at their respective companies for less than one month were excluded from the survey.

Interviews were conducted in order to address three primary research questions. First, what kinds of colleges did the participants graduate from? Furthermore, what was the management style of these institutions like, and what were their deviation scores? Second, could a pattern be identified among the participants in terms of their work history from the standpoint of career change? Moreover, why did they resign from their previous positions and choose to become skilled contract employees? Further, what are their ambitions from a career perspective? Third, what were the participants' job search strategies prior to graduation? Likewise, how do they feel about the prestige or ranking of the institutions from which they graduated?

Survey Results

General Findings

A review of the hiring policies enforced by the four companies revealed a tendency to hire individuals possessing graduate or undergraduate degrees as regular employees for administrative and technical positions; conversely, recent high school graduates generally occupied skilled positions. In terms of mid-career employment, undergraduate and graduate degree holders, like recent college graduates, tended to hold administrative and technical positions. However, some companies did occasionally hire skilled regular employees as mid-career employees. Moreover, some companies hired skilled regular employees for mid-career positions, and likewise enabled contract employees to transition into regular positions. With regard to contract employees, each company hired individuals possessing a variety of diplomas (e.g., junior high/high school graduates, career college/university graduates, and occasionally graduate degree holders), in addition to high school and college dropouts. Nevertheless, high school graduates were considered ideal candidates for these positions.

Non-regular employees tended to be promoted to regular positions after a year (or occasionally two years), provided that they possessed a positive work attitude. However, such promotions tended to be selective due to changes in positioning, as well as changes in domestic production caused by globalization. Hence, college graduates working as skilled contract employees hoped to obtain a regular position. This necessitates that they maintain high self-esteem and motivation in an environment wherein many supervisors and regular employees possess lower degrees, compounded by anxiety related to insufficient income and future job prospects.

Participants' Academic Backgrounds

Interviews took place in Aichi Prefecture and the western part of Shizuoka Prefecture. Accordingly, most participants attended nearby private colleges located in regions where deviation scores are relatively lowⁱⁱ. Of the participants, only two obtained degrees from institutions with deviation scores exceeding 50; the remainder graduated from schools with deviation scores ranging between 30 and 40. These institutions were typical of the non-prestigious, non-selective schools discussed by Igami. Indeed, many individuals in this study who attended such colleges indicated that they experienced difficulty in their attempts to procure employment.

Table 1: Overview of Research Results

Name	Age when hired	Workplace	Hometown	Academic history				No. of companies worked	Average service occupation (No. of months)	Work history (employment form, industry, occupation)	
				Location of university	Management style of university	Major	Deviation scores				Failed to enter, repeated a year
A	27	FGR	Me	Ishikawa	Private	Civil engineering	40	No	1	54	Regular (manufacturing, part assembly)
B	26	FGR	Shizuoka	Aichi	Private	Career design	35	No	1	24	Regular (manufacturing, part assembly)
C	29	FGR	Aichi	Shizuoka	Private	Mechanical engineering	35	No	2	27	Regular (manufacturing, engineer)→family business (carpenter's shop, bankrupt)
D	30	FGR	Aichi	Aichi	Private	Economics	48	No	4	17	Regular (major hamburger franchise, store manager)→regular (major apparel production and sales company, deputy store manager)→non-regular (auto manufacturer, vehicle assembly)→non-regular (pachinko store, store staff)
E	33	FGR	Aichi	Aichi	Private	Economics	50	No	2	53	Regular (office supply manufacturer, sales)→regular (major apparel production and sales company, sales representative)
F	27	TKG	Aichi	Aichi	Private	Civil engineering	43	No	1	38	Regular (construction, engineer)
G	26	TKG	Aichi	Aichi	Private	Business administrator	35	No	1	44	Regular (automobile dealership, sales)
H	27	TKG	Aichi	Aichi	Private	Business administrator	38	No	1	4	Regular (fish market, nonclerical worker)
I	24	TKG	Aomori	Aomori	Public	Business administrator	48	1 (repeated a year)	0	-	None
J	24	TKG	Shizuoka	Kyoto	Private	Literature	39	1 (repeated a year)	1	4	Regular (Internet provider, sales)
K	34	TZR	Aichi	Aichi	Private	Art	40	No	1	144	Regular (engineering company, engineer)
L	25	TZR	Aichi	Fukui	Private	Architecture	42	No	3	8	Regular (major curry franchise, store staff)→regular (mortuary, facility operation staff)→regular (mortuary, facility operation staff)
M	25	TZR	Aichi	Aichi	Private	Business administrator	35	No	1	36	Regular (moving company, driver and cargo work)
N	28	RGV	Osaka	Osaka	Private	Economics	51	No	3	20	Regular (bookstore, sales representative)→Non-regular (major distribution industry, sales representative)→Non-regular (automobile manufacturer, vehicle assembly)
O	26	RGV	Shizuoka	Aichi	Private	Economics	43	No	0	-	None

Source: Prepared by the author based on interviews.

Despite the above findings, human resources management staff members at the four companies indicated that a handful of individuals who attended prestigious colleges, including holders of graduate degrees, had applied for contract employee positions, and were in fact hired in some instances. In many cases, these individuals had not actually completed their degrees; consequently, recruiters expressed hesitance in hiring such persons due to the company's inability to offer them a reasonable career path, in addition to a tendency for this demographic to resign within a short period of time. Some employees were identified who fit the aforementioned criteria, although they declined to participate in the study. As mentioned earlier, non-regular college graduates working at a plant wherein many supervisors and regular employees are high school graduates may cause the former group to exhibit low self-esteem. This feeling is even more pronounced for those who graduated from prestigious institutions, and hence may have been why such individuals chose not to participate in this research.

In terms of majors, only four of the study's 15 participants possessed diplomas in the sciences; the remainder obtained degrees in the humanities, among which eight were economics or business administration majors. Although a college graduate's decision to accept a skilled, non-regular position typically held by high school graduates represents a departure from his or her expected career path, it may nonetheless be necessary given the infrequency with which such individuals are able to procure technical positions. However, given these considerations, graduates with degrees in the humanities may still be overlooked as potential hires by recruiters seeking skilled contract employees.

Prior Work Experience

Of the 15 participants, 13 possessed prior work experience. Twelve of those individuals (four and eight who majored in science and the humanities respectively) obtained regular employment immediately after graduation, and had no preference in terms of job type. One person, however, was an economics major, who worked as a sales representative at a bookstore under non-regular employment prior to obtaining employment at the plant. Hence, 80% of the interviewees currently working as skilled contract employees acquired regular positions immediately after being hired by their respective companies. Moreover, two people who majored in civil and mechanical engineering initially obtained work as engineers at a construction company and manufacturer, respectively.

In terms of individuals who majored in science specifically, one person had previously worked as a skilled employee, while another initially procured employment at a restaurant. Therefore, only 50% of the individuals who graduated from the school of science acquired an engineering position following graduation. As for individuals who possessed diplomas in the humanities, four people were originally regular employees working as administrators in sales and marketing; the others included a design engineer, a skilled professional, a nonclerical worker at a fish market, and a driver/cargo worker at a moving company. Hence, the interviews revealed that most of the participants were hired as regular employees following graduation, and that half of them obtained positions unlike those typically held by college graduates in fields such as engineering or as administrative staff members.

What, then, is the relationship between participants' pre-employment work experience and their current positions—a factor that is likely to be examined in one's pursuit of regular, mid-career employment? Of the individuals whose first jobs were related to their current position (i.e., as skilled employees at a manufacturing plant), three were engineers and two were skilled workers. Two of the three engineers worked for a construction or engineering company, while the remaining individual worked for a manufacturer. As for the two skilled workers, both assembled vehicles at an automobile manufacturing plant as non-regular employees prior to acquiring their current positions. Hence, prior work experience seems to be irrelevant in terms of the procurement of work by skilled contract employees.

The number of positions held by participants with prior work experience, in addition to the period of time that they spent with a particular employer, varied between one to four companies and four months to twelve

years. Moreover, many participants applied for their current positions while working for their previous employer. This seems to indicate that individuals who repeatedly change employers in a short period time, as well as those who are unemployed, do not necessarily become skilled contract employees.

Career ambitions and reasons for seeking new employment

We attempted to determine why participants sought work at a manufacturing plant as skilled, non-regular employees. Furthermore, why did some individuals, who previously held regular positions, choose to work as skilled contract employees? Regarding the first question, each of the participants expressed a desire to transition from being a contract employee into a regular employee in order to achieve stability and further their careers. In terms of reasons why interviewees chose to pursue alternative employment, their responses could generally be divided into two broad categories.

First, most (seven) interviewees sought a different position due to concerns involving wages and the long-term stability of their previous employer. Of these seven participants, six were regular employees (A, B, H, J, K, L) and one was a non-regular employee (N). This suggests that workers at small to midsize companies may be apprehensive concerning job stability and future career prospects. For example, N, who once worked as a skilled contract employee at an automobile manufacturer, stated that he resigned because it was unlikely that he would have become a regular employee. N made this decision despite the fact that working conditions at his previous employer were superior.

The second most common complaint, which was mentioned by four participants, concerned harsh working conditions (e.g., long overtime, lack of holiday vacations, and difficult quotas); such factors increased anxiety among workers in terms of health concerns and the uncertainty of their careers. Prior to working at the factory, these individuals (D, E, G, M) primarily held positions as salespeople or in the service industry, and were in some cases previously employed by companies that could be considered untrustworthy. D, for instance, was employed by a major hamburger franchisee after graduating from college, which enabled him to gain some managerial experience; later, he worked as an assistant manager at a major apparel retailer. Nevertheless, D noted that he could not maintain a regular sleeping schedule, and that he disliked being employed in the service industry due to irregular working hours.

Other participants who formally held positions in sales or service had similar grievances. For example, E could not meet his employer's strict sales quotas, and subsequently resigned. After being unemployed for a long period following that, he procured a staff position at a major apparel retailer. However, the long working hours proved to be detrimental to E's health. Likewise, G also struggled to meet rigorous quotas, and found it difficult to continue working in sales. M, on the other hand, noted that he was relegated to working for a moving company due to his failure to adequately search for employment prior to graduation. Unlike the others, his dissatisfaction was rooted in the relentless physical labor that his work required.

The experiences of M and other participants highlight that, despite progress in mechanization and automation, certain factors are inherent with regards to physical labor, whether it involves regular or non-regular employment. In such cases, shift-based schedules that include long hours are considered normal. Hence, it is understandable that many individuals, including the study's participants, would seek alternative employment due to the mental and physical fatigue that typifies the sales and service industries.

Participants' job search strategies prior to graduation, and perceptions of their graduating schools

Participants were asked to describe their approach to finding work prior to graduating, in addition to how they perceived the education that they received. Six of the interviewees (A, B, H, K, M, N) indicated that they were not hired by their employer of choice. Four individuals (D, G, J, L) indicated that they received numerous unofficial job offers, however they neglected to perform additional research concerning these companies; moreover, these participants admitted that they should have exerted greater effort in searching

for a job prior to graduation. Two interviewees (I, O) stated that they made no attempt to locate work prior to obtaining their degrees. In contrast, three people (C, E, F) maintained that they were satisfied with their efforts to procure employment prior to graduation. Hence, with the exception of the three aforementioned individuals, most participants did not successfully procure employment prior to graduating from college.

In terms of the participants' perceptions of their college experiences, most interviewees stated that they did not believe their schooling aided them in becoming more productive members of society. Furthermore, one respondent wished that he had attended a more prestigious school, even if it meant repeating a year. Conversely, some participants described their experiences in higher education positively. These individuals indicated that they enjoyed participating in sports activities while completing their degrees, or that the knowledge they obtained proved beneficial in completing civil service examinations.

Although non-selective colleges may be lacking in prestige, Igami discovered that individuals who attended them possessed greater self-esteem when compared to high school graduates or high school dropouts from the same generation. To some extent, this notion seemed to be mirrored in the interviewees' responses, even among those whose career paths deviated from their initial expectations. Despite encountering difficulties in obtaining suitable employment following graduation, the respondents did not generally attribute their setbacks to their attendance of a non-selective college. This could be because their degrees allowed them to secure positions with stable employers, or due to the fact that it enabled them to pass police or civil service examinations.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study's 15 interviewees obtained a variety of positions in numerous industries that strayed from those generally held by college graduates. Individuals who found work following the completion of their degrees initially became regular, skilled contract employees; however, due to the inherent nature of this kind of work, these individuals soon became extremely dissatisfied with such positions. These findings are in line with prior studies indicating limited job prospects for people who have graduated from non-prestigious institutions, and non-selective colleges in particular. Moreover, the results of this study indicate that college graduates are losing their competitive edge over individuals possessing only a high school diploma. As such, it is imperative that both students and schools recognize that people who obtain degrees from non-selective colleges will likely be competing against high school graduates in the labor market. Accordingly, non-selective institutions must ensure that their students can successfully pass qualification tests and civil service examinations.

While conducting this survey, one human resources employee remarked that college graduates did not always outperform high school graduates on tests and during interviews for skilled contract employees. In fact, many college graduates examined by this particular employer scored below 50% on aptitude tests comprising elementary and junior high school level questions. Thus, these candidates lacked skills in basic reading, writing, and arithmetic. This suggests that non-selective colleges, as well as their graduates, should take adequate measures to increase competence in these areas. Furthermore, while examining the nature of job availability among recent graduates is important, it is equally necessary to identify steps that might lead to career advancement. To achieve this, graduates should receive support until at least the age of 30; however, such support should ideally began before graduation, and attempt to equip students with the skills necessary to further their careers even after they have obtained employment.

In addition to equipping prospective graduates from non-selective schools with the tools necessary to further their careers, steps should be taken to ensure that their legal rights as workers are maintained. This entails making them aware of the dangers associated with working for untrustworthy employers, who in many cases may hire individuals based on a single interview. Likewise, newcomers to the labor market should understand the difference between an abusive, exploitative employer, and a challenging position that affords one room to grow.

It must also be noted that students and recent graduates from non-selective colleges should understand that their career options might be limited, and that they ought to remain open to non-traditional job opportunities. Thus, while personal preference is important in searching for work, individuals must also be realistic and consider various avenues of employment in order to sustain themselves. Indeed, career education that fails to account for this does prospective graduates a disservice. Additionally, by accepting positions not typically held by college graduates, one can gain valuable experience, which in turn could be an asset to their future career development. However, students may not be aware of how to harness such experience and translate it into a new career direction. In that respect, appropriate career education may also prove highly beneficial. Future research should include a greater number of participants, and also feature refined interview questions that take the present study's findings into account.

¹ The author reached out directly to three different companies, from which 12 of the study's 15 participants were obtained. Contact with the remaining three participants, whom a fourth company employed, was established through an acquaintance. In all cases, the purpose of the study was explained, and participants were assured that their answers would be used for strictly academic purposes. Interviews were conducted on a strictly one-to-one basis.

² This number was obtained by calculating the average values published by three major preparatory schools in these regions.

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