

Frenzy for Public Jobs Prevails

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By Lee Jin-woo, Staff Reporter Korea Times

Two female students enter a cram school in Chongno-gu, central Seoul, Monday, to study for the civil servants entrance exam. There has been a rush among young job seekers to these preparation schools so they can become public servants, mainly due to job security.

Life is very different now for Jang Uhn-duk, 32. Last November he became a police officer after spending more than three years as an assistant manager at a local company based in Incheon, west of Seoul. He had to give up several things to get the uniform, such as few million won (a few thousand U.S. dollars) drop in annual income, as he had to start at the bottom in the strict organization well known for its seniority.

However, after spending some nine months in uniform he says the change to life as a civil servant was well worth it.

"I felt insecure at the private company although the company I worked for was relatively conservative so they let their workers stay there at least until their late 40s," he said. "As a police officer I now feel much more satisfied as it's a quite stable job. I can stay here until I retire at 57 — just so long I don't make any mistakes."

Jang's case reflects one major aspect of today's South Korean job market where civil servant posts, no matter whether high or low ranking, or state-run company jobs are increasingly in demand.

A cram school in Chongno, downtown Seoul for students preparing to become police officers requires students to pay 1 million won (\$950), a relatively high tuition fee to take five different classes including English and criminal law for a couple of months, but the institute has been packed with students in their 20s and 30s.

"Previously college graduates, especially those graduating from universities in Seoul, would hardly have wished to become low ranking police officers, but the situation is very different now," an official of the institute said. "Many private company workers are attending classes at night here, preparing for the exam for about a year due to fierce competition."

Often dubbed "Cholbapdong" (iron rice bowl), civil servants get paid up to 76 percent of their final salary for their lifelong pension as long as they spend

more than a certain required period. For instance a low ranking civil servant retiring after three decades in the job will get paid 2.2 million won per month until death.

Earlier this month, a total of 151,097 job seekers nationwide applied for 932 posts available in the Seoul city metropolitan government.

In a July survey poll of 1,719 private company workers by Job Korea, an online job information provider, 28.4 percent of respondents said they spend their spare time preparing for entrance examinations to become civil servants or state-run company workers.

Some 70.5 percent replied they have seriously considered working in government-related jobs.

Among those searching for another job, 48 percent said they are studying in the pursuit of more secure and stable jobs.

"I've been wondering whether it is worthwhile to spend my whole life following my hectic schedule as a bank clerk," said a 28 year-old employee of Citibank, who recently made up his mind to seek a job at a state-run company. "Due to the tight job market here, not many senior bank employees can move from one bank to another. In other words, once you get older, you've no place to go."

When it comes to marriage, civil servants or state-run company employees have become increasingly eligible.

A survey result by Duo, a matchmaking company, showed 42.4 percent of female respondents said they preferred a man with a government-related job for their bridegroom last year. In the same company's survey in 1996, employees of conglomerates placed first with 65.3 percent.

"The ongoing frenzy for public servants clearly shows the poor job security of those who work in the nation's private sector," said a senior researcher at the Korea Institute of Finance. "Special pension programs for civil servants and stable job status have attracted many young people looking for a government-related job."

things@koreatimes.co.kr