

Korean People in Job Transition

By Alvin Toffler

Ever since its beginning, the emergent new economy has seen a consistent reduction in the amount of work requiring muscle-power and an increase in the amount requiring mind-power, very broadly defined.

This has been reflected, in many countries, in a declining percentage of factory jobs and an increase in the skill levels required. Even in factories, a smaller and smaller percentage of workers actually perform manual labor, while the others provide technical support, do administrative work, monitor machines, and spend more and more of their time communicating, meeting, training, collecting, appraising and disseminating information.

Elsewhere, others are busy running servers, writing software, integrating data networks, and feeding the Internet.

However, the fact that knowledge is at the heart of the new economy doesn't mean everyone will need to be a computer expert or a nano-technologist. The new economy also needs an enormous variety of service workers, from hotel chefs and chambermaids to hospital nurses and neurologists. Not all these tasks are done in fixed work locations in factories or offices – or on conventional schedules. More and more work is done in hotels and restaurants, at home or on an airplane, in fact – anyplace, anytime. And many jobs cross national boundaries.

Nevertheless, it would be utopian at best, dishonest at worst, to give the impression that such changes can occur without significant dislocation and distress in society as old skills are devalued and new ones required, and as old jobs disappear under the avalanche of the new. Many people will suffer; many more, we believe, will see their lives improved.

Some degree of "frictional unemployment" is normal in the economy. This is the temporary unemployment created when workers shift from one job to another.

Rapid change in the economy suggests higher levels of this type of unemployment. More important is the loss when entire groups with obsolete or unwanted skills lose their jobs and others with new or more needed skills replace them in whole or part. The speed up of change and the dramatic differences between the old and new economy point to greater turnover.

As Korea moves into the new economy, the total number of jobs may not decline– it could, in fact, grow. In the U.S., for example, where the transition to the new economy began earliest, the overall number of jobs has actually grown. In 1970, the total non-farm employment stood at just over 71 million. Three decades later, it had grown to more than 132 million.

While other factors may be more important in explaining joblessness, the numbers certainly do not suggest that use of the cyber-infrastructure reduces employment. Just as the nature of work changes, unemployment, too, changes in the new economy. In short, unemployment goes from quantitative to qualitative.

Trade Unions Tomorrow

Just as corporations must change, so, too, must unions.

In Europe, the United States and in Korea as well, unions have supported valuable social innovations, broadened political participation, and taken other forward-looking steps that helped modernize society. However, to be "modern" today is really to be backward.

Thus unions in Korea face a fundamental decision. Like corporations and the nation itself, they must decide whether to embrace the transition to the new, knowledge-based economy, or to resist it. If they choose to move forward with the economy, they, too, will have to change. If they choose the path of resistance, in the hope of slowing or stopping the transition to the new economy, they risk losing relevance and influence.

Just as unions helped protect workers in Korea's Second Wave economy, now unions can help them prepare for and adjust to the new economy. Unions can help members obtain the necessary training and education. Facilitating the transition, rather than resisting it, makes their members more marketable in event of job loss, and unions may retain them as members as they move on to their next job.

To serve members better, unions may have to build strategic alliances with professional associations or other bodies. As products, markets, media and other aspects of society de-massify and offer more choice, so, too, will employment. Korean companies cannot customize products and services without, eventually, customizing their treatment of employees. And unions will have to follow suit. The workforce of tomorrow is not made of "masses" but of individuals.

It is often recommended that unions, governments and companies cooperate in the national interest and lay their differences aside. It is unrealistic to assume that unions, companies and governments can, or should, avoid all conflict. Some conflicts generate creativity – new ways to solve old problems. But conflict must be limited and legally contained. Vandalism or physical attacks on people or property by protesting workers should not be tolerated. But there must also be no room for unprovoked repression by police or for collusion between government and business when workers stage legal, peaceful strikes or protests.

Strong, smart, independent unions can help make a stronger, smarter Korea– but only if they join with government and business to advance the transition to a knowledge-based economy. In turn, companies and government must recognize the difficulties faced by unions in making this transition and, where possible, help rather than seek to weaken or destroy them.

One of the Federation of Korean Trade Unions major goals for the year is the introduction of a five-day workweek. A labor and management compromise could help workers and businesses adapt to the changing environment.

Chances for a compromise might be increased if some of the reduced hours of work were pre-committed to training and education.

Experience in France, which cut the workweek from 39 to 35 hours a year ago, has not proved disastrous for business, as some had predicted.

Instead, it helped some employers by increasing flexibility in scheduling.

Some firms – like Wanadoo, the country's largest Internet portal – saw productivity actually go up.

By supporting, rather than resisting, the introduction of advanced technology, and especially by allowing wider flexibility in the allocation of jobs, unions can help Korean producers remain competitive against lower-wage rivals in Southeast Asia or China.

In shifting their goals and methods, unions will also have to change their internal organizational structures and their external relations with other institutions.

Employers today increasingly form temporary strategic alliances, joint ventures and other links with other firms. They seek non-business allies as well to deal with health, environmental, regulatory, political and other issues. Unions do, too.

In the future, as competition intensifies further, this will become even more important. Unions will need friends, rather than enemies, among professional societies, environmental groups, other NGOs, and even rival employers.

Before conditions reach so bitter a confrontation, it is critically important for unions and employers to behave not merely with their own immediate interests in mind, but to recognize their responsibility as well to Korean society as a whole. It is, of course, easier to make these suggestions than for unions to implement them. Korean unions need to anticipate the difficulties that lie ahead and, instead of opposing what is good for the nation – an advance to a higher-level economy – work with government and employers to cushion their members and prepare them for new roles in the economy of the 21st century.

This is the eighth and the last in a series of articles based on excerpts from a paper published by well-known futurist Alvin Toffler and an independent advisory group, Toffler Associates, at the request of the Korean Information Society Development Institute (KISDI) about the emergent global economy of the 21st century and Korea's place in it. –ED.