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South Korea Works Overtime to Tackle Vacation Shortage

Nation Leads in Refusing to Take Time Off, but Productivity Lags; Bosses Set the Pace

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SEOUL—The government here is cracking down on vacations: Workers, it seems, aren't taking enough of them.

South Koreans were told for decades to sacrifice everything to build the country's economy. Now South Koreans are world-champion workaholics, according to the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, logging more hours a year on the job than people in any other developed country.

The government is trying to change that. The ministry in charge of government personnel issued a directive in January requiring the country's one million state workers to submit to their bosses a plan to take 16 days off this year.

The hitch: In a hierarchical society where superiors set the tone in business and politics, some of the very bosses behind the vacation push can't be bothered to take them.

President Lee Myung-bak raised the national vacation deficit at a cabinet meeting last summer, pointing to a survey showing that the typical government worker took only six of the allotted 23 days. Mr. Lee's personal tally since taking office in February 2008, according to media reports: four days.

One member of Mr. Lee's cabinet, Unification Minister Hyun In-taek, told The Wall Street Journal he passed the government's vacation directive throughout his agency, which is responsible for South Korea's dealings with North Korea. But he has taken no vacation himself.

"I want them to take more time off," Mr. Hyun says. "But as for me? I don't know."

To cajole reluctant holidaymakers, the government has brought in the heavy artillery: a guy from Germany, home to some of the world's top vacationers.

Born there as Bernhard Quandt, he moved to South Korea in 1978 and became a naturalized citizen in 1986, changing his name to Lee Charm. Mr. Lee, who teaches language on TV, hosts radio shows, writes books and gives lectures about Korean culture, is one of the country's most visible foreign faces.

Lee Charm preaches the 'three joys' of vacation—the joy of planning one, of being on one and of remembering it later.

In August, Mr. Lee was named the head of the government-owned Korea Tourism Organization, whose 550 employees develop tours, promote the country and should, theoretically, know a few things about taking time off. A few months later, he called a company-wide staff meeting where he announced he wanted everyone to take at least two weeks off in 2010.

"I didn't take it very seriously," says KTO employee Seo Dong-woo, who helps plan tourism promotions and figures he's taken, at most, five days off in a year. "I thought: 'Is that really possible?'"

It wasn't. Mr. Lee's staff told him it was too much to expect workers to miss two weeks in a row, so the boss scaled the plan back to seven days off in a row.

Mr. Seo still hasn't finalized his own plans.

Many workers, and the country's media, have cheered the government initiative.

There's hope it will spill into the private sector, where vacation-shirking is also rampant. SK Telecom Co., a leader in tearing down old workplace hierarchies, says its workers take five to 15 of their available 22 days off. At LG Electronics, the average is 10.

Hyundai Heavy Industries boasted last month that its top managers would work mid-February's Lunar New Year's holiday, visiting foreign plants. "Every year Hyundai Heavy's top management carries out the MBWA (Management By Wandering Around) policy during national holidays and summer vacations to check project progress and to have meetings with owners," it said in a news release.

Some workers say they don't know what to do with the free time. Others are protesting the state's vacation push, accusing leaders of trying to save money: In many government agencies, employees are rewarded with extra pay for unused vacation days.

"You should be able to take a vacation whenever you feel like," says Yoon Jin-won, spokesman for the Korean Government Employees' Union, the biggest union of government workers. "When the government forces you to do it, I would say it violates human rights in a sense."

South Koreans worked an average of 2,316 hours in 2007, the latest year for which data are available. That's down from 2,592 a decade earlier but still well above the average of 1,768 for the 30 countries in the OECD and 1,794 in the U.S., according to the OECD.

South Korea's productivity, however, ranks below all but some former Soviet bloc countries among OECD members.

The KTO's Mr. Lee says he's trying to persuade South Koreans that vacation can recharge batteries and spur creativity. In interviews in the Korean media, he preaches the "three joys" of vacation—the joy of planning one, of being on one and of remembering it later.

South Koreans often miss that formula, Mr. Lee says. "They go when the opportunity arises, usually very spontaneously. And because they didn't prepare well, they have a lot of stress and usually have to pay more. And when they get back, instead of having nice memories, they feel tired and stressed out and think, 'Never again.'"

The government's focus on the vacation problem began when President Lee Myung-bak brought up the survey to cabinet members last July. Later, the culture minister began urging people to use their full vacation time, and the president appointed Mr. Lee, the naturalized German, to head the KTO.

But noncompliance can be found even at the core of the government's efforts. The official at the Ministry of Public Administration and Security who wrote and issued the 16-day vacation requirement last month was Kim Jin-soo, a director in the ministry's personnel management office. Mr. Kim says he took no time off last year.

When he and his staff got together to organize vacation days after his directive, others took time in January. Mr. Kim scheduled his day off for Feb. 1, a Monday, planning to use the three-day weekend to visit his hometown about three hours from Seoul. But then, Mr. Kim says, "Something came up so I couldn't go."

His sister, Kim Jung-ja, who planned to host him, says she wasn't surprised.

"Our mother passed away three years ago, and he couldn't visit often while she was alive, either," she says. "I think he is like the busiest person in the whole world."

So the author of the government's vacation policy deferred his planned time off to the big Lunar New Year holiday last month.

Contacted after the holiday, Mr. Kim said 43% of his ministry's staff added two extra days to the long weekend. He wasn't among them.

"There are so many things to take care of" at work, he said. "I am thinking about taking vacation in March."

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