

Professional Civil Service of Korean Government

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“Open Competitive Exam”: A Successful Story

The root of the Korean civil service system can be traced back to the "Unified Silla Dynasty", approximately 1,200 years ago, when civil officials were recruited through open competitive examinations. The present Korean civil service system is a career system based on merit principle. The Korean constitution stipulates a fundamental principle of democracy by saying that all civil servants shall be servants of the entire people and be responsible to the people and all citizens shall have the right to hold public office under the conditions prescribed by law. Open competitive exam for civil service is a way for realizing this principle. Anyone who wants to be a civil servant is eligible for the exam regardless of academic background, job career, gender and social standing. The result of the exam is the only criterion to determine who will work for the government.

The open competitive exams are classified into three types according to the employed grades: the open competitive exam for Grade 5(junior manager level), Grade 7(principal clerk level) and Grade 9(clerical level). The first one is called “the Senior Civil Service Exam” as one of the most difficult exams for recruiting competent persons of the future manager.

This Korean style exam has been a gateway for realizing so-called “Government Dream” to talented young people. Especially, those who passed the Senior Civil Service Exam have been guaranteed successful career. Increasingly, many of them have been appointed political service such as minister or vice-minister, as well as assistant secretary that is top position for professional civil servant. Such a bright future must be very attractive to talented young people and makes the exams highly competitive (exam for grade 5 - 41:1, for grade 7 - 99:1, for grade 9 - 57:1, in 2003).

Open competitive exams have been playing a significant role in establishing the merit system and professionalism of the Korean government since 1966 when the present form of the open competitive exam begins. Thanks to the open competitive exams, civil servants in Korea enjoy legitimacy and pride on their jobs. Undeniably, these civil servants have been the driving force for Korea's fast economic development for the last four decades. The key factors for the success of the exam can be described as follows:

- The exam accepts applicants regardless of their gender, academic background, career and other social status.
- The exam selects successful applicants demonstrated by their exam score only.
- The administration of exams has been successful in securing fair competition among applicants. For example, access to the persons who are responsible for exam questions is completely prohibited until the exam ends.
- Traditionally, public recognition of civil service as an occupation has been very high.
- Success in the exam practically guarantees good opportunity of high positions in both career as well as political service in government.

In order to make the current open competitive exams more relevant and successful for attracting talented and competent civil servants Public Service Aptitude Test(PSAT) for the Senior Civil Service Exam is scheduled to be introduced from 2004. The PSAT is geared to test applicants' aptitude for their hoped-for jobs. The PSAT consists of three parts: the Linguistic and Logical Ability Test (LLAT), the Data Interpretation Ability Test (DIAT) and Circumstantial Judgment Ability Test (CJAT). The LLAT assesses basic linguistic competencies such as forming a complete sentence, understanding, logical thinking, expressing their idea clearly and effectively, and reasoning. The DIAT evaluates applicant's ability to use basic statistic skills and to interpret the results as well as the ability to utilize the information. The CJAT checks deductive

reasoning, analysis competency, problem-solving ability, judgment and decision-making ability.

Needs for Reform

The open competitive exam system has managed so far to select excellent civil servants throughout the country. However, professional government requires more than a just good recruitment system. Korean civil service system still needs to motivate its personnel and to improve its performance management. Thus the existing civil service system is now faced with growing needs for reform mainly due to the following reasons:

At first, it has been pointed out that the elites who passed the Senior Civil Service Exam tend to preoccupy with their own promotion within government and to neglect self-development. Once they pass the exam and they are supposed to have life-long job security and periodic promotions ultimately to senior positions. Because of this security and exclusiveness, productivity of government can not be guaranteed.

Secondly, Traditional rank-in-person system resulted in frequent position rotation, which has been recognized as a principal cause of the civil servants failing to become experts of their own specialized fields.

Thirdly, though the exam is still popular, civil servant's relatively low salary and benefits began to be an obstacle to attract and retain talented young people into civil service. To young people, civil service as an occupation is not attractive any more. The poor working condition has also prompted many promising civil servants to move out to private sector.

Efforts to reform for better government

1. Operation of "Open Position System"

To prevent the civil servants recruited through the successful civil service exam from being content with the status quo and also make up for defects of the traditional rank-in-person system, the government introduced the "Open Competitive Position System" (OPS) in 1999. The new system is

based on the belief that introducing the element of competition within the public sector could contribute to enhancing efficiency and productivity of the public administration. It is designed to recruit outstanding talents and expertise from both private and public sector. Under OPS, each Ministry should designate around 20% of its positions of Grade 4 and higher as open competitive positions. 142 positions in 40 government organizations were chosen as open competitive positions. Once an Open Competitive Position becomes vacant, the job requirements should be announced publicly by advertising in daily papers and other media. Anyone who meets the qualifications may apply for it and qualified person will be selected through fair procedure.

2. Improvement of compensation program

In 1999, the government also introduced the performance-related pay system, the annual merit incremental program and the performance bonus program, in order to encourage competition among civil servants. The performance-related pay system is operated in connection with the performance management systems such as MBO. The five-year (2000-2004) plan for the improvement of the pay level was also set up in 1999. The main goals of this plan for the civil servants' pay is to narrow the gap between the public and private sectors and to re-organize the pay structure rationally.

Reforms to be continued

On the whole, the current reform of the civil service for professional government seems to get public support. However, further improvements are still required for success of the reform. The government needs to induce more people in private sector to be interested in and apply for the “Open Position”. The appraisal system of individual performance should be developed more. Despite of government’s continuous effort, the pay level of civil service, especially high ranking official (grade 3 and above), is still low as compared to that of private sector.

Challenges for Civil Service System

Today many nations in the world have been constantly implementing civil service reform in order to realize a better government. Though programs of the reforms are quite various as challenges with which each government is confronted are diverse, the most important challenges to civil service system of developing countries appear to be as follows:

Political Neutrality

Civil servants shouldn't work for a particular political party's interest but for the public. Civil servants in the developing country are easily to be influenced by powerful political parties. Therefore, government needs to establish a system that civil servants can impartially perform their duties, independent from powerful political parties. As a part of the system, government's open competitive recruitment system is essential. Merit principle in promotion and other personnel decisions should be also valued and protected. Lastly, the political activities of the civil servants should be prohibited.

Establishment of professional “Human Capital Management” agency

Currently, public and private organizations began to recognize their human resources as an important “human capital”. Thus many governments have been setting up well-organized long term plan for efficient HCM and concentrating on securing and nurturing talented civil servants. In order to successfully drive the necessary reform for meeting the global standard, professional HCM agency is indispensable. Civil Service Commission of Korean government was created in order to meet such needs in 1999. The CSC, consisted of five commissioners with three-year term guaranteed by the law, has been playing a important role in designing and implementing a various reform measures to lead the necessary changes in the government as well as maintaining transparency and equality in the civil service practices.

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