

Job-hunting students may be in for a shock when they arrive at their new company



It's spring, and the attention of journalists in Japan turns to new university graduates who will soon become productive members of society. In recent years, the recruitment dance has merited closer scrutiny. Even as the labor situation has become a seller's market, issues persist with regard to employee status and workloads.

[Kyodo News](#) conducted a survey of 86 national universities in January, and while only 11 responded, those 11 reported that a good portion of their grads have complained that the reality of corporate life was different from what they expected based on employers' job ads and interviews.

Schools can only do so much. Tokushima University said it warns students during the recruitment process about companies that lied in the past, and Nagasaki University offers "career education lectures" for job seekers that teach them basic labor law. According to [Mitsuko Uenishi](#), a professor at Hosei University quoted in a March 22 Tokyo Shimbun article, many new grads don't report such issues to their universities since they think it's their own responsibility to look out for their own interests and make the proper decision.

But that doesn't mean they won't complain to someone if they feel betrayed. The Labor Standards Bureau (LSB) received 12,000 inquiries in 2014 from new grads who quit their jobs due to unexpected working conditions. In 2012 the NHK social issue series "[Heart Net TV](#)" aired a program about "youth poverty" that mentioned "*shinsotsugiri*," which means "new graduate cutting," a practice among companies that regularly hire new college graduates en masse. As discussed in this column last week, many of these companies don't have the wherewithal to properly assess potential when they start interviewing students during their final years of university. Instead they hire based on vague criteria, like the status of the school they attend.

Both the NHK program and the Tokyo Shimbun article mentioned the nonprofit organization [Posse](#), which helps young people navigate the modern work environment. Posse told Tokyo Shimbun it has received an increasing number of calls from recent graduates who say they were forced to quit their jobs not long after starting them.

Companies who hire large numbers of new grads typically take on too many with the intention of figuring out which are better suited to their respective ways of doing things. The ones that don't make the grade are let go, but since the companies can't fire them without good cause they use various psychological techniques to make them quit, including "power harassment." According to "Heart Net," some companies even hire consultants who coach them in these techniques. Between January and September of 2015, Posse received 500 shinsotsugiri complaints, many from parents who said their children were too defeated and depressed by the ordeal to seek help themselves.

NHK interviewed one female graduate who had been told during the recruitment stage that she would be made a regular employee right away, but during her first week on the job she was given a contract to sign saying that employment status would be determined after a three-month probationary period. For those three months she worked every day from 8 in the morning until 10 at night, racking up more than 70 hours of overtime a month that, according to the contract, was incorporated into her salary, meaning she didn't get paid extra for it. Later, she calculated that she had earned, on the whole, ¥837 per hour, about the same as Tokyo's minimum wage. Consequently, there was nothing illegal about the pay scheme. Nevertheless, the woman was persuaded to quit by supervisors who denigrated her performance on a continuing basis.

Another means of judging compatibility is internships. Recruited students, even those who haven't graduated yet, are sometimes asked to work for free in order to "learn

about the company." In actuality, the company is learning about the student.

Though "Heart Net" was unflinching in its depiction of invidious employment practices, it left the impression that the only solution was for new graduates to beware of them. That was late 2012, but as Posse chief Haruki Konno related on a recent [TBS Radio discussion](#), nothing has changed. Though these methods constitute fraud, there is little that victims can do after the fact except report them to the LSB.

The term "*burakku kigyō*," meaning companies that unfairly exploit workers, has become common parlance, but in a seller's market such as the one we're enjoying, employers have to be competitive to get the best human resources, and there is no law that punishes lying to accomplish that goal. At the end of the "Heart Net" program, the announcer told viewers who believe they've been exploited by employers to get in touch with Posse, as if it were the only organization that could help them.

The authorities, apparently, are useless, as illustrated in a program segment about a [civil suit brought against the government](#) for refusing to publicly identify companies where employees died from overwork (*karōshi*) as determined by the LSB. The government claimed that naming these companies "might lower their social position and, as a result, damage employment possibilities" for job seekers.

This rationalization seems to have been accepted by the mass media, which only identify companies accused of such practices when they are defendants in [work-related lawsuits](#). Weekly magazines and tabloids publish names of black companies because their job is to be provocative, and firms like the restaurant chain [Watami](#) and [Seven Eleven](#) have been forced to own up to their exploitative employment practices as a result.

The mainstream media feel they have to follow the government example, even if there is no legal proscription against naming businesses in the pursuit of a story that could have social benefits. If these companies are suspected of wrongdoing, then reporters can contact them and allow them the opportunity to explain the situation on the record, because that's what reporters are supposed to do.