Introduction

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation & Development (OECD)’s report on the average number of hours worked annually, Korea ranked second from the top with an average of 2,163 hours a year. This is 1.3 times the OECD average working hours (1,770), and 1.6 times the Netherlands’ working hours (1,380).

A number of reports have been published that reference this data and advocate the legal reduction of working hours as a solution to Korea’s “workaholism.”

But do Koreans really believe that the number of hours they work is a significant problem, and that legal regulation of those hours is the best solution?

To answer this question, DHR International carried out an online survey of 200 Korean managers, currently in a director level position or higher, working at Korean or multinational firms in Korea.

1. Working Hours

33% of respondents reported that, on average, they work more than 11 hours a day, and only 40% of respondents think that they are working too many hours. It’s important to note that most executives at Manager and Director levels are not eligible for overtime pay, spending long hours at the office of their volition. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they do not believe that legal regulation of work hours will make them work less.

How many hours on average do you work daily?

- 9–10 hours: 56%
- 7–8 hours: 21%
- 11–12 hours: 11%
- Above 12 hours: 12%
2. Work Efficiency

46% of the respondents reported that their highest level of productivity was achieved during hours that, in total, represented approximately two thirds of their work day. 62% of the respondents agreed that they could be just as productive working fewer hours.

Do you think that work-life balance can be best achieved by legal regulation of work hours?

- No: 51%
- Yes: 49%

Do you think you work too many hours?

- No: 60%
- Yes: 40%

Do you think that you could work fewer hours and be as efficient?

- No: 38%
- Yes: 62%
A majority of survey respondents remarked that the biggest factor contributing to working long hours was corporate culture. It is perceived that “starting early and working late is expected in the workplace”, and “honorable.” One respondent even remarked that adhering to the workplace’s culture influences performance reviews by the Personnel Department.

Korean corporate culture has been deeply influenced by the philosophy and traditions of Confucianism. Individuals are expected to show respect for their elders and superiors in the workplace. Within this construct, workers cannot graciously leave the office before his or her manager. The regulation of work hours as dictated by the governments of France and the Netherlands would be a culturally unappropriated remedy for Korea.

Moreover, it seems that working even longer hours is becoming the norm. 60% of the respondents report that their hours have increased during the past five years.

Despite that, respondents generally felt that productivity is not particularly high. However, 75% of respondent say that their company is taking measures to improve the situation, indicating that companies seem to be addressing that issue. One way of reducing work hours would seem to be limiting traditional corporate activities. 50% of the respondents say that they have been encouraged to have fewer team dinners. 34% of respondents say that would like to see their company reduce mandatory overtime.
Team bonding activities are still a very important part of the business culture in Korea, but they are seemingly becoming less relevant.

3. Work Life Balance

This research also examined the work-life balance of Korean managers as a possible factor in the low productivity of labor. Many reports have addressed employees as a single entity when addressing that issue, but it is the work-life balance as it pertains to at management is relevant, too.
52% of 200 respondents stated that they are happy with their work-life balance. Among those who were unhappy with their current work-life balance, 70% replied that 6-7 hours a day would be the appropriate time to spend at work in order to achieve an ideal work-life balance. The average work day, as per the OECD, is 7.1 hours, indicating that the range suggested by respondents is seemingly ideal. A reduction in the hours in an average work day would seem to be an appropriate and realistic direction to pursue in terms of improving the current work-life balance of Korean managers, but it would require a significant change in Korean corporate culture.

Admitting that working less would improve work-life balance, respondents focused on what they would do with their free time. While family is an important factor, it was twice as important to work on self-improvement (studies and health).
Footnotes


Established in 1989, DHR International is one of the largest retained executive search firms in the world, with more than 50 offices around the globe. We conduct search assignments at the board of director, C-level, and functional vice president levels. DHR’s renowned consultants specialize in all industries and functions in order to provide unparalleled senior-level executive search, management assessment and succession planning services tailored to the unique qualities and specifications of our select client base.