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Introducing a New Talent Management System for Korea's Public Officials

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Abstract

This article criticizes that the personnel management system for Korean public officials is seriously lacking competition among public employees and fails to nurture their competence and confidence due to too much reliance on rank, seniority, closed recruitment, and excessive rotation of positions as well as due to the consequent problems of deep-seated ministry selfishness and rising political influence over public officials. To redress such a state of crisis, we suggest that the new talent management system for Korean public officials should be introduced through 3C (competition, competence, and confidence) strategies and three major reforms that include abolishment of the elite recruitment system at the fifth-level, abolishment of the career path in which most public employees serve for a single ministry for entire duration of their careers, and introduction of the matrix personnel management system that combines the vertical management with the horizontal one.

1. Introduction

The Fourth Industrial Revolution is coming fast. The barriers that once stood between academia and technology is starting to crumble, and the digital convergence connecting objects to lives of people is beginning to accelerate its pace. In addition to technological transition, globalization, social polarization, low fertility and aging society, and industrial restructuring have made the administrative environments for many countries increasingly more complex and diverse. These are the new kinds of challenging or ‘wicked’ problems (Head & Alford, 2008) that countries must deal with today. Thus, countries are now faced with the pressures of coming Fourth Industrial Revolution while struggling to find answers to these ‘wicked problems’ at the same time. It will be only 10 years until winners and losers of the Fourth Industrial Revolution are clearly separated. Therefore, in this crucial moment in time, it will be imperative for the government to establish and implement new strategies to cope with these problems and take the lead by becoming the main agent of change and transforming itself.

To this end, this paper focuses especially on the competency of public officials as one of the key factors determining success of the transformation. It is commonly observed that often the deciding factor of policy results is how effectively public employees conduct their administrative works. This still holds true today, but the reputations of public officials, who were once touted as the leaders of national developments, are no longer the same as can be seen by the mounting public distrusts on public employees. In the minds of citizens, the ideal images of public officials are agents who provide public services and who realize national visions as pillars of national developments. In reality, however, citizens now view public officials with resentments and criticisms (Figure 1). As a consequence, public officials of today are overwhelmingly judged to be incompetent and ill equipped with skills necessary to solve the social problems and lead the national development in today’s increasingly diverse and complex society. Therefore, in order for the government to become an organization that can satisfy the demands of the upcoming technological and social changes in complex administrative environments, the government must be able to recruit talented individuals and also develop their capabilities to the fullest to cultivate competent administrative experts appropriate for the ever-changing future. Otherwise, the government will neither be ready for the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution nor be able to cooperate actively with the market when critical.

In short, the focus of this paper is on the fact that under the new era of the ever-converging, hyper-connected, and citizen-led society, individual expertise and capabilities demanded on public officials are far greater than those in the past. In other words, major reforms in the public employee management system are in order. To this end, we suggest introducing a new talent management system for Korea’s public officials, overhauling the public employee personnel management system from recruitments and position assignments to evaluations and promotions.

Figure 1. Ideal Images and Social Distrust of Public employees

Ideal Images of Public Officials	Social Distrust on Public Officials
Public Servants	‘Iron Rice Bowl,’ Corruption
Pillars of National Developments	Ministerial Selfishness
Realize National Visions	Reigning, Bossy
Providers of Public Services	Desk Administration, Incompetent
Politically Neutral / Fair	No Souls
Self-Sacrifice	Rigid, Complacent

Sources: Adapted from Moon and Park (2015; 148).

2. Problems with the Personnel Management System for Public Officials

The competency gap between public employees and private sector workers are growing in Korea. A recent empirical research¹ based on the OECD data showed a shocking result that various competencies (numeracy, literacy, problem solving of Korea’s public sector employees were evaluated to be lower than those of private sector workers (Lee et al., 2016). This is a worrisome sign for policy makers. For any organization, regardless of whether it belongs to public or private sectors, all matters related to employees including recruitment, education and training, and general management of human capital such as putting the right employees at the right places have always been of utmost priority, as the Korean saying goes, “Personnel is everything.” This is truer than ever in this era. As administrative environments become more complex and roles taken by the government become more diversified, there are greater demands on the government to hire talented individuals and nurture them into pillars of innovations and development, in order to take advantage of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and gain national competitiveness, the importance of human resource management cannot be overemphasized.

Although the Korean government has been making various efforts to enhance capacities of its public officials through processes of recruiting outstanding talents, providing continuous education and skill development programs, and utilizing private sector experts, innovations in the recruitment system of public officials are still limited, and even the plans to utilize private sector experts have not been fruitful thus far. For instance, the Ministry of Personnel Management announced in 2016 work plan that it would expand the number of experienced recruitment positions to 50% of the 437 open positions (as of 2015).² However, its size so far has not even reached 1% of the total recruitment.³

¹ The research utilized the OECD’s PIIAC (Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies) survey dataset which was conducted between 2011 and 2012. It samples adults aged 16 to 65 in each target countries and covers literacy, numeracy, and key information-processing skills (as indicated by problem solving in technology-rich environment; Lee et al., 2016: 75).

² Seoul Economy, 2016. 01. 26.

³ In 2015, there were 30,588 newly recruited public officials and among them only 166 were recruited through open recruitment process.

At present, the recruitment system of public officials in Korea can be divided into entry-level and experienced recruitment systems. Examining each in detail, first, the entry-level recruitment system itself can be further split into national and regional public officials. In terms of position levels, the entry-level recruitment system hires fifth-, seventh-, and ninth-level public officials, and with respect to tasks, there are administrative, technical, and special services public officials. All Koreans can apply for the entry-level positions regardless of education level, and the process essentially involves two written tests and one final interview. The recruitment process occurs in accordance with the State Public Officials Act, and organizations that conduct this type of recruitment process include the Ministry of Personnel Management, the Korea Meteorological Administration, the Statistics Korea, and the National Election Commission (Table 1).

Conversely, the experienced recruitment system shows somewhat different characteristics to the entry-level counterpart. First of all, the experienced recruitment system, by its nature, is a process conducted when there is a need for specialized talents in a specific field. As such, one notable difference with respect to the entry-level recruitment system is that eligibility criteria for the experienced recruitment system include certifications or relevant work experiences in the private sector for the specified field (Seo, 2012) while the other is essentially open to all Koreans. Likewise, the entry-level positions are recruited periodically, but the experienced recruitment system is non-periodic. Moreover, the number of experienced positions recruited and their requirements are not fixed each time, naturally, but rather are determined flexibly depending on the situations of each hiring ministry. According to a research by Ahn and Kim (2013), as of 2015, about 33% of all hiring was completed through the experienced recruitment system since its inception in 2011.

One recent trend observed in relation to the hiring of public officials is gradual increases in the proportion of those recruited through the experienced recruitment system. The rationale behind the trend appears to be based on the fact that although the entry-level recruitment system guarantees fairness and objectivity as it selects individuals based on equal criteria for everybody, it is not particularly apt at discovering outstanding talents with both task competency and specialized skill sets (Park & Kim, 2005; Moon & Park, 2015). On the other hand, the experienced recruitment system can flexibly hire individuals with the right abilities, expertise, and experiences for the given position at the right time, filling the gaps unfulfilled by the entry-level recruitment processes (Moon et al., 2016). Furthermore, as a potential solution to the frequently voiced concern that among the entry-level recruitment systems, the fifth-level recruitment in particular induced the problem of exclusiveness within organizations, introduction of the experienced recruitment system, which lowers entry barrier into organizations for individuals from private sectors and allows hiring of talented individuals seems to be the right response. Therefore, it is apparent that through the experienced recruitment system, the government aimed to foster competency of public officials while resolving one of the chronic problems of government ministries, which is exclusiveness. However, despite the consensus on the need to innovate personnel management system including the recruitment of public officials, several institutional problems have yet to be solved.

Table 1. Entry Level and Experienced Recruitment Systems

	Entry Level Recruitment	Experienced Recruitment
Concept	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stresses guaranteeing fair opportunity; to select talented public employees; targeted for unspecified masses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An examination to recruit employees in specific areas where recruitment is difficult through the entry level system. It is targeted for experts or people with experiences in relevant fields.
Legal Basis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> State Public Officials Act: Article 28, 31, and 35 Decree on the Appointment of Public Officials: Chapter 2 Section 1 Decree on the Appointment Examination of Public Officials: Article 21-25 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> State Public Officials Act: Article 28 Decree on the Appointment of Public Officials: Chapter 2 Section 2 Decree on the Appointment Examination of Public Officials: Article 26-30
Types	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fifth-level for administration and technical positions as well as for position in foreign affairs and trade Seventh and ninth level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Career positions recruitment with background in relevant fields
Requirement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No particular requirement other than minimum age (some category of positions have licenses as requirements in accordance with the Article 18 of the Decree on the Appointment Examination of Public Officials) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Restricted by licenses, work experiences, or academic degrees
Conducting Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mainly conducted by the Ministry of Public Administration and Security <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fifth-level and above Sixth-level and below: conducted for 14 categories of positions The Ministry of Meteorological Administration, the Statistics Korea, the National Election Commission 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mainly conducted by minister of recruiting ministry

Sources: Seo (2012); adapted from Moon and Park (2015; 137)

First, the rank and seniority systems is impeding widespread adoption of competition- and ability-centered personnel management systems. According to the results of *Measures to Strengthen Capacity of Public Offices*, a survey conducted by the Korean Development Institute in 2015, top-down rank culture and seniority custom still constitute significant parts of the

culture within public offices (Moon & Park, 2015). Among the 250 public employees who responded to the survey, 148 employees (59%) agreed that there does exist a top-down culture in which they find it difficult to disagree with opinions of superiors (Moon & Park, 2015). This is more than three times as large as the number of employees (42 employees; 16.8%) who did not see any top-down culture within public offices (Table 2).

Table 2. Results of the Survey on Public Office Culture: Top-Down

	Highly Agree	Somewh at Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Highly Agree	No Response	Total
Hard to Disagree with Opinions of Superiors	5 (2)	37 (15)	59 (24)	112 (45)	36 (14)	1 (0.4)	250

Note: Numbers in parenthesis indicate percentage of the total.

Sources: Adapted from Moon and Park (2015; 149).

Because of such top-down and seniority cultures, public employees face situations in which they cannot assert their opinions once they are met with disagreement by their superiors even if they have ideas and willingness to innovate existing task processes. Furthermore, as it is difficult to voice differing opinions to those of superiors' even when opinions of superiors may be irrational or contain problems, the whole organizations could go down the path leading to unreasonable results. In the end, the top-down rank culture fosters negative environments where members within organizations choose to become complacent rather than transformative and innovative. Indeed, according to the 2015 KDI survey mentioned earlier, 86 public officials (34.4%) agreed and 95 (38%) neither agreed nor disagreed to the questionnaire asking whether "it is risky for my career if I advocate too innovative things." In contrast, only 68 public employees (27%) disagreed, confirming that there are indeed more complacent public employees than those who are not (Table 3).

Table 3. Results of the Survey on Public Office Culture: Complacency

	Highly Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Highly Agree	No Response	Total
Advocating Too Innovative Things are Risky to My Career	8 (3)	60 (24)	95 (38)	71 (28)	15 (6)	1 (0.4)	250

Note: Numbers in parenthesis indicate percentage of the total.

Sources: Adapted from Moon and Park (2015; 149).

Second, there is a problem that personnel management continues to stay rigid because of closed recruitment system of public officials. There are researches on exclusivity of public employee society indicating that the problem arises from the closed recruitment system (Park,

Baek, & Lim, 2004; Park & Kim, 2005; Kim & Lee, 2012). In reality, however, it is not easy to transform the current closed recruitment system into a new one because exclusivity of public employee system⁴ has been maintained for a long time through the fifth-level entry recruitment system. Nonetheless, this is a necessary step towards becoming a better government. Kim and Lee (2012) researched whether openness of public offices was related to efficiency and integrity of government among OECD countries. According to the research, countries with high degree of public office openness such as Denmark, New Zealand, Sweden, Australia, Netherland, Germany, Luxemburg, Japan, and France tend to have low degree of government corruption.

The third problem in the Korea's personnel management system is the excessive rotation of positions leading to low task continuity and work expertise. In brief, the position rotation is a system in which individual public officials move to different positions after spending certain period of time in one position to provide them with wide range of work experiences in various fields and to equip them with broad perspectives. Initially, this system was introduced as a measure to counter the illnesses of bureaucracy such as sectionalism and coalescence, but now it is being pointed out as the main factor that lowers competence and sense of responsibility of public officials. For instance, a former minister of the Ministry of Personnel Management, Lee Kun Myun, argued in a news interview in 2015 that "at the top of the public personnel management problem is the position rotation system. Irresponsibility and rigidity of public employees are all due to the position rotation system."⁵ Although the position rotation system was purported to accumulate various work-related experience, as long as the current system only rotate public officials within a single ministry, it is difficult to accomplish the initial purpose (Moon & Park, 2015). Moreover, since a position last only less than for two years, public officials are rotated to a different position as soon as they are accustomed to the last position. This significantly lowers work efficiencies and blocks any opportunity to actually use their expertise and skills that they have accumulated.

The fourth personnel management problem is the ministry selfishness. Although inter-ministerial cooperation has become important, more so than ever, in overcoming complex policy problems, the current personnel management system with very little mobility of public employees across different ministries cannot deal with the ministerial selfishness problem of public officials. There are numerous cases of inter-ministerial conflicts stranding reform policies or delaying urgent actions because public officials prioritize gains of their ministries over those of the nation and, ultimately, of the people. Also at times, through the regulatory and control centered administration, public officials bolster the power of their own ministries at the cost of public benefits and even guarantee positions for their superiors after their retirement.

At its core, this is a personnel management problem. Rather than being judged based on objective performance assessments and achievements, personnel evaluations of public officials tend to be carried out arbitrary by superiors in their ministries. As a consequence, the system

⁴ Exclusivity in the recruitment of public official means "range of potential candidates who can be appointed to conduct particular high ranking positions and the more the range is limited to particular small groups of candidates, the more exclusive the public official recruitment system is" (Kim & Lee, 2012: 139).

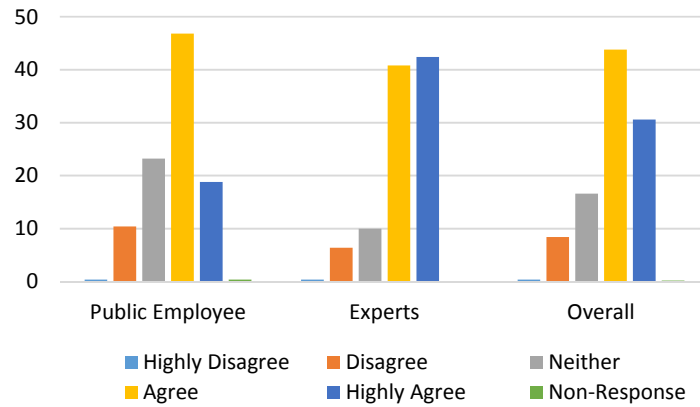
⁵ Naeil Shinmun (2015. 2. 3)

breeds tight-knit networks within the ministry members and favoritism towards its own ministry. Thus, there are many voices advocating the need to fix the extreme ministerial selfishness by improving the closed personnel management system of working within single ministry for entire duration of their careers toward the model of cross-ministerial position rotations.

Finally, increasing political influence of bureaucrats are weakening political neutrality of public employees (Figure 2). Only when political neutrality of public employees is maintained, can the government regain trust of publics and protect medium- to long-term public interests while keeping consistency of policies (Moon & Park, 2015). Public officials can protect the public interests by remaining politically neutral. More specifically, Park (2011; 25) saw political neutrality of public employees as including “approaching the work from the public interest perspective.” Therefore, political neutrality of public employees in the long-term allows build-up of public’s trust in government workers that they are doing their duties as experts for the benefits of the public. In turn, the public’s trust that public officials are doing their tasks as administrative experts independent of political interests or influences is the sure-fire way of gaining public’s trust in the government itself. However, there are many cases where public officials undermine their political neutrality such as illegally intervening into election process of politicians (Park, 2011), and, critically, even the reverse is true as there are also cases of political influence acting on personnel management matters concerning public officials (Park, 2011). This is forbidden by the current public employee laws. Hiring and promotion of public employees must strictly be based on achievements as well as fair standards and process, and those from spoils or patronage systems are prohibited (Park, 2011). Although this is the law, in reality, personnel managements of public officials are often determined by internal conflicts and politics within bureaucracy or by external political pressures rather than by individual competence or achievements due to the excessive position rotation and inadequate evaluations of public employee. Thus, to cut political ties and restore political neutrality of public officials, the introduction of adequate and objective evaluation will be the key factor.

In the following chapter, we examine possible measures to deal with numerous problems of Korea’s public official personnel management system outlined above: rank and seniority systems problem, exclusivity in recruiting, excessive position rotation, extreme ministerial selfishness, and weakening political neutrality.

Figure 2. Results of the Survey on Public Office Culture: Political Influence



		Highly Disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Highly Agree	Non-Response	<i>t</i> -test
Difficult to Conduct Honest Administrative Works Due to Increasing Political Influences	Public Employees	1 (0.4)	26 (10.4)	58 (23.2)	117 (46.8)	47 (18.8)	1 (0.4)	-0.175
	Experts	1 (0.4)	16 (6.4)	25 (10)	102 (40.8)	106 (42.4)	0 (0)	
	Overall	2 (0.4)	42 (8.4)	83 (16.6)	219 (43.8)	153 (30.6)	1 (0.2)	

Sources: Moon and Park (2015: 156).

3. 3C Strategies for Introducing New Talent Management System

Problems in Korean public employee management system have serious repercussions including public office culture and environment lacking competitions and competencies, as well as pride and principles among public employees themselves, within public offices, and across public organizations as a whole. Once talented individuals are selected as public employees, due to the public office culture and environment lacking competitions, they no longer seek to improve their expertise and skills. Even when they have strong passion for self-improvement, they are often faced with institutional problems that hinder their efforts. Moreover, because they are not guaranteed political neutrality, there are side-effects of public employees having difficulties in finding pride and principles in their positions as government workers. Thus, to overcome these problems, we suggest introducing a new talent management system for Korea's public officials through 3C strategies which are a) openness through *competition*, b) integrated specialty through *competence*, and c) political neutrality through *confidence* (Figure 3; Table 4).

Figure 3. 3C Strategies and Systemic Problems of Public Offices



Table 4. 3C Strategies and Its Implementation Details

Strategies	Implementation Details
Competition > Openness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expand entry-level recruitment system / reform seniority centered system / open public employee system - Improve personnel assignment management through continual expansion of position classification system - link strict and objective achievement and performance evaluation with position, promotion, and reward - provide fast-track promotion opportunities for talented public employees and dismiss ones that are incompetent
Competence > Integrated Specialty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improve the fifth-level entry recruitment system and expand capability centered recruitment - Improve career management and structure career paths going beyond the barriers between ministries - Internal reinforcement of capacity development
Confidence > Political Neutrality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strengthen educations inspiring pride and self-efficacy among public employees - Strengthen political neutrality of public employees and prevent politicization - Raise responsibility of high ranking government officials and increase their autonomy and roles to fulfill their responsibilities - Improve actual reward system for outstanding public employees

3.1. Openness through Competition

To improve the current rank and seniority systems in public offices, first, there need to be expansions in open recruitment system, and overall openness of the public offices also need to be raised by employing achievement and performance based system in place of rank and seniority systems. The most important form of open recruitment system is the experienced recruitment system. Using this system, public offices can select and place talented individuals by employing highly capable private sector experts. It is expected that opening the public offices to outsiders will bring competition to public offices and facilitate its adoption of a competition-centered system of personnel management. Likewise, by hiring experts from private sectors, problems of traditional seniority-based promotion system can be redressed, and new organizational cultures can be cultivated where new positions are assigned in accordance with career experience and expertise of individual public officials, and rewards are provided based on individual achievements and job performances. In fact, the former minister of the Ministry of Personnel Management, Lee Kun Myun, announced ‘plans to reinforce competence- and performance-centered personnel management’ in October 2010. More specifically, in the promotion evaluation of public officials, the plan reduced proportion of the seneiority from 5-30% to 5-20% and raised those of performance assessment from 70-95% to 80-95%. This kind of change is aligned with a general reform across the public sector, and in actuality, OECD countries are indeed transforming towards placing greater emphasis on individual achievements and job performances in promotion and salary systems of public employees (OECD, 2012).

Second, the current task classification system should be continuously strengthened, and task oriented personnel management should also be fostered. As a contrasting concept to the rank system of the traditional personnel management system, task classification system is a method of vertically and horizontally sorting task categories based on type of their difficulties by analyzing roles of ministries and positions (Choi, 2015). The task classification systems being employed in Korea include contract public employee system, position contest system, and experienced fifth-level recruitment from the private sector. A common factor is that they were pushed forward to raise openness in public offices (Choi, 2015). The task classification system has contrasting characteristics to the rank system in terms of its recruitment, promotion-career management, evaluation-reward, and incentive perspectives (Table 5). In particular, with the task classification system, it would become feasible to recruit based on specific task expertise as well as to evaluate and reward based on merits, making it possible to reinforce specialty of public employees with focuses on performance and achievement.

Third, public employees should be given appropriate position, promotion, and reward based on strict and objective performance evaluation and achievement management. Over the last 20 years, OECD countries have been emphasizing raising efficiencies of government organizations to meet the complex and various roles demanded on governments. As such, each nation has been making efforts to develop and improve various achievement management systems, such as performance indicators, program evaluations, cost-benefit analyses, partial evaluations, and

expenditure evaluations, to advance job capabilities of public officials with accurate achievement management in its central government organizations (OECD, 2012). Each country is selecting and implementing measures that link transparent and accurate achievement evaluations of public officials with position, promotion, and reward systems (OECD, 2012).

Fourth, in order to induce performance and achievement based competition, the government needs to expand its systems to provide ‘Fast-track’ promotions for talented public officials and, at the same time, weed out those who are incompetent. At present, public officials of Korea must spend set minimum years of service before they can be promoted (Seo, 2012). More specifically, current types of promotions can be divided into three, which are regular, tenured, and special promotions. Considering that employees are eligible for the regular and tenured promotions after satisfying a set years of service, the rank and tenure rather than achievements and job performances become more important factors in the current promotion system. Therefore, it is a challenge for public officials to self-motivate themselves to outperform in their tasks or to develop expertise under this system, indicating that to rectify the problems, there need to be active adoption of performance- and achievement-based promotion and dismissal system. A foundation for this system already exists. In line with these policy intentions, the former minister of the Ministry of Personnel Management, Lee Kun Myun, announced the plans to facilitate special promotions for high performers in June 2015. This system was an extension to the expansion of recruitments of private sector experts and to the introduction of ‘Fast-track’ to raise job performances and competence of public officials. Before the ‘Fast-track’, it took 20-25 years for a ninth-level public official to reach the fifth-level, but with the plans to facilitate special promotions for high performers, it is now possible for ninth-level public officials to reach fifth-level even within 10 years. With the introduction of the ‘Fast-track’ system, each ministry could determine its own proportion of special promotion and method in accordance with its own circumstance, and the central government only needs to support and monitor each ministry to ensure that the system is operated as initially intended.⁶

⁶ The Ministry of Personnel Management homepage.

Table 5. Comparisons Between Rank and Task Classification Systems

		Rank System	Task Classification System
Recruitment	Human Capital Acquisition	Recruit per ranks	Recruit per tasks
	Requirement	- General abilities - Prefer young people with high potentials	- Particular task specialty
Promotion and Career management	Route to Promotion	exclusive	Emphasize openness (in- and outside of public offices)
	Transfer of Personnel	Consider flexibility as a position rotation system	Long-term career at specific tasks in charge
	Training and Education	In general, they are conducted when there are hiring or promotions for each rank	Conducted as needed for each position
		Stresses wide range of experiences of general administrators	Stresses experiences in specialty areas
	Career Development	- Priority is in developing management capabilities - In the field, it emphasizes development of specialty	- Priority is in developing task skills - The need for developing management capabilities depends on career development system
Evaluations and Rewards	Measure Performance	Difficult to measure	Easy to measure
	Performance Criteria	Seniority/Rank/Ability (potential capabilities as expressed by ranks)	- difficulty and responsibilities of tasks - merit based (achieved results)
	Setting Rewards	Pay grade based on ranks (emphasize living wage and seniority-based pay)	Centered around position- and performance-based pays
Points of Emphasis in Internal Motivations of Personnel Management	Immersed in organizations	Immersed in tasks	

Source: Choi (2015; 28)

3.2. Integrated Specialty through Competence

For competence to become the standard in recruiting and managing public officials, the entry-level recruitment system, first and foremost, needs to be transformed to rely on capacity-based criteria in its recruitment process. Since the current entry-level recruitment system is judged to be fair and is conducted and managed objectively by the central government, it still has the advantage in terms of giving fair and equal chances to everybody. However, the down-side is that it is not well suited for discovering talented individuals with specialized sets of skills for given government positions due to its heavy reliance on paper and pencil exams (Moon & Park,

2015). Therefore, the entry-level recruitment system needs to incorporate, at least partially, some elements of qualitative assessments to address short-comings of the current system based on the quantitative assessment. For instance, skills and general competence required of public officials in the long-term such as basic behavioral capacity, job performance competence, and management and social skills must be assessed multi-dimensionally and comprehensively using various tests already being employed in the private sector such as blind tests, problem solving projects, role playing, and interview camps (Moon & Park, 2015).

Second, measures to abolish the current fifth-level entry recruitment system should be pursued, and in its place, sixth level public employees should be hired as a priority and selectively promoted instead to the fifth level using the fast-track system. Although many new talented individuals are being recruited through the fifth-level entry system, there are also cases where the fifth-level employees do not show particularly strong achievements or performances when they are actually working in their ministries. In contrast, there have been cases of public officials hired as seventh-level performing well above their level in actual duties. As such, there should be considerations to switch the current fifth-level entry recruitment system to one that recruits sixth-level public officials instead, and also let the sixth-level employees compete with those who are hired as seventh-level for the fifth-level position based on job performances and achievements. The major advantage expected with this system is that the seventh-level employees will have access to the fast-track promotion while the fifth-level positions could be assigned to appropriate personnel based on assessments of task-related competence.

Third, career management system must be improved, and career paths that go beyond inter-ministerial barriers must be structured. As an example, consider the story of King Sejong the Great. Despite the strictly class-based society of the period, he carried out unprecedented reform of the personnel management system in which he appointed workers based on their expertise. It is no wonder that ruling under the King Sejong the Great was the most peaceful period within the Joseon Dynasty era as he was able to develop science and agricultural technologies of the Joseon Dynasty by discovering new talents like Jang Yeong-sil. Considering the closed and rigid personnel management system of today's Korean government, the works of King Sejong provide important lessons to be learned. In order to succeed this spirit and implement expertise based personnel management, the current position rotation system need to be improved such that transfers are restricted by enforcing minimum service of three years per position assigned, and a matrix personnel management system should be introduced, which conducts assessment and management of positions according to type of tasks carried out. Since the current position rotation system changes positions in less a year on average, it is difficult for public officials to accumulate expertise and sense of responsibilities with regards to given tasks. Thus, there needs to be an incentive system, such as career, pay, and promotion benefits, so that public officials are encouraged to accumulate experiences and become competent workers.

Likewise, there is a need to implement a career management system going beyond inter-ministerial barriers. A number of prior researches on this topic also emphasizes the need for flexible career management to overcome the inter-ministerial boundaries (Choi, 2003; Nam &

Ryu, 2004; Kim, 2008). To this end, authors of this paper suggest introduction of ‘I-type career system. In brief, in this system, new public officials work in at least three ministries for at least three years each for the total of 15 years until they reach the section chief position. Then, they continue to work in one ministry until they are promoted to become high ranking officers, at which point they can again rotate across ministries.

Fourth, education and training for public officials should be strengthened. According to the survey conducted by the KDI in 2015, the current educations for public employees are centered on providing large amount of knowledge at once, meaning that there are only few debate- or problem solving-based education (Moon & Park, 2015). However, this is a serious misstep in the today’s world. Fullan and Langworthy (2014) argued that 21 century talents require creativity, critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration, communication, character, and citizenship or 6Cs, and these traditional ways of teaching public officials are not appropriate for cultivating the 6Cs at all. Therefore, the current education and training system of public officials should incorporate more debate project, and learning by doing so that it moves towards the direction where individual public officials can develop appropriate skills and competencies that they can actually relate to their daily tasks.

3.3. Political Neutrality Through Confidence

To establish public office culture that enables public officials themselves to cultivate their own pride and principles regarding public offices, first, there should be more educations intended for inspiring pride and self-efficacy in public officials. It is well established in empirical researches that public officials’ self-efficacy and pride in self raise their job engagement and organizational commitment (Hong, 2008; Song, 2012). Likewise, having pride in working in public posts as public officials or having confidence in one’s ability and efficacy can have positive impacts, leading to greater job performances in actual tasks. For instance, in a survey conducted for Korean public officials in 2013 revealed that the most important reasons for becoming public officials were guaranteed job position and stable economic life of public officials.⁷ In other words, they lack sense of duty and identity as public officials when they engage in public services. In addition, according to the survey conducted by the Ministry of Personnel Management in 2015, 53.2% of public officials participated answered that ‘improvement in pride and morale of public officials’ is the most urgent priority in innovating public offices.⁸ This reflects the fact that it is not just outsiders, but public officials themselves also feel negatively about themselves and are losing their pride as public officials, indicating the urgent need for solutions.

Second, political neutrality of public officials should be reinforced and politicization of public officials should be prevented. Since the formation of modern states, public officials have

⁷ It refers to the survey conducted by Korea Institute of Public Administration in April 2013 on central and local government public officials across the nation. Results of the survey is published as a report titled “Survey on Public Officials’ Perception of Administration.”

⁸ Public Official U Newspaper (2015. 01. 19).

been able to devote themselves to public services because they were guaranteed of their positions through political neutrality. Han (2016), for instance, classified politicization of bureaucracy into two concepts, politicization as a power and politicization as a tool, and from these, he suggested responsiveness and professionalism as the concepts constituting political neutrality. According to these conceptualizations, the process of protecting political neutrality for public officials can be seen as improving expertise regarding their works and securing responsiveness as administrative government under representative democracy. Thus, politicization of public employees needs to be prevented through political neutrality of public officials by private firmly establishing fairness and trustworthiness as their core values.

Third, higher responsibilities and autonomies of high ranking public officials are important to hold them accountable. High ranking officials take key responsibilities in supporting the president or ministers. In addition, they are also in charge of suggesting directions to lower level public officials and putting actual efforts in achieving policy targets and results. In recent years, however, large number of public officials think that a lot of changes have occurred regarding the relationship between authorities and responsibilities of public officials. For example, according to a survey on 230 public officials conducted by a newspaper agency in 2015, 189 respondents (93%) answered to the questionnaire “how is the authority of public officials now compared to the past?” that it has declined a bit at the least.⁹ This may actually be a positive result reflecting the fact that the authorities of public officials have indeed declined in comparison to those in the past and that the mechanism put in place to check and monitor abuse of authorities is working as intended. On the other hand, however, negative aspects could also be seen from this result in that public officials are influenced too much by the political pressures rather than autonomously making decisions based on their principles. Therefore, while it is necessary to keep the checking and monitoring mechanisms for preventing excessive abuse of power, the public officials should also be granted more autonomies and discretionary powers to fulfill their work responsibilities and to maintain political neutrality.

Fourth, the reward system for outstanding public officials needs to be improved. Choi (2009), for example, emphasized that in order to raise openness of public offices, the current reward system should be reformed towards one that is based on performance, competence, and job responsibility. Singapore, which is well-known for high competence and integrity of its public officials, select and train exceptional individuals as public officials even from high school or universities and provide them with high salary in accordance with their abilities as well as opportunities for fast promotions. At the same time, Singaporean performance-based pay system has shown cases of low salaries or even dismissals for low performing public employees. Korea, likewise, needs to renovate its reward system to link achievements and performances with salaries and promotions to provide effective incentives. The politicization of public official can be removed in Korea only when the reward system is reformed in this way.

⁹ Chosun Biz (2015. 08. 17)

IV. Three Reforms to Introduce a New Talent Management System for Korea's Public Officials

This chapter provides detailed discussions about three reforms under 3C strategies in order to introduce the new talent management system of Korea's public officials. The three reforms are as follows: a) abolishment of the entry-level recruitment at the fifth-level, b) abolishment of the career path in which most public officials serve for a single ministry throughout their career, and c) introduction of the matrix personnel management system that combines the vertical and horizontal managements.

4.1. Abolishment of the Entry-Level Recruitment at the Fifth-Level

The most common method of recruitment for new public officials currently is the entry level recruitment in which all those who meet the eligibility requirements have the opportunity to apply and be selected through examinations. Unless there are other special reasons, in principle, new public officials should be recruited through the entry-level recruitment process in Korea (Oh, 2005). However, with the advent of knowledge economy, diversified and complex administration, and various perspectives on the definition of a talented person, traditional public employee personnel management has been shaking. More specifically, the entry-level recruitment system based on one-size-fits-all type of examinations is being criticized heavily.

The problems in the current recruitment system can be divided into two parts. The first problem is the low relevancy of higher education for the examination. In fact, many test-takers point out that university lectures have no use in preparing for the entry-level recruitment examination, and some students even decide to drop out of universities to prepare for the entry-level recruitment exam. Furthermore, there is also the concern that the examination itself is not really useful in measuring the skills emphasized in today's public sectors such as communication and collaboration skills. For example, the current English test in the entry level recruitment examination is based on rote learning and memorization. As a result, it is difficult to evaluate practical language skills. In addition, there is a question of low validity in selection of test subjects. At present, four and five subjects are examined for the first and second tests during the fifth-level entry recruitment process, respectively. As for the seventh- and ninth-level entry recruitment examinations, applicants are tested seven and five subjects, respectively. However, because each subject has low linkage to each other and because there are many unnecessary subjects, very heavy burden is placed on test-takers. Furthermore, there are gaps between subjects tested and actual skills and knowledge used at work after passing the exam.

To overcome these weaknesses and to recruit as well as to train outstanding public employees who are ready for the current administrative environment, construction of recruitment and assessment systems in the long-term perspectives is required rather than short-term assessment based on exams. Two possible alternatives to the current system are presented.

First of all, the plan A is a more gradual approach to the plan B. It involves hiring new recruits who have passed the fifth-level entry examinations and finished new trainee program as sixth-, rather than fifth-, level public officials and place them in local governments or in front-line of administrative fields. Once there, new recruits will first accumulate work experiences for three to five years as sixth-level public officials. Then after a performance assessment, those with high competence will be promoted to the fifth-level deputy director and guided towards a track in which they can become a section chief after 15 more years of service. Thereafter, they can even be promoted to high ranking officials depending on their capabilities, and once they reach that point, they may be allowed to work in various ministries.

In this way, new high-level recruits can have the opportunity to effectively see and understand processes taking place in the fields and have better learning experiences than those who undergo general trainee programs. Furthermore, by employing a performance-based competition between new recruits, excellent workers could be promoted through the fast-track while those who are under performing could be restricted of promotions. Using this approach, it will be possible to encourage achievement motivations of individuals and build positive competitive environment from the organizational perspective. Since years in service become longer with this plan, the old problem of early retirement is rectified while at the same time, it has the advantage of being able to promote talented employees with practical work skills.

In contrast, the plan B is a more drastic reform involving integration of entry level recruitments for fifth- and seventh-level public officials. More specifically, the plan involves, first, integrating the currently separate fifth- and seventh-level recruitment system into one and, as in the previous plan A, have the new recruits work temporarily for three to five years. Here, it is important to design a system where these recruits can accumulate and go through various front-line administrative work experiences. Those who set distinguishing achievements and performances in that period should compete with each other and be promoted to fifth-level deputy director position and then to the section chief position after another 15 years of service. From then on, as in the plan A, depending on their competence, they could move forward as high ranking officials. In comparison, for those who did not show the capacity, they could be directed to a path similar to the one that is set for the current seventh-level public officials. Additionally, there could also be a consideration of giving the freedom to choose a ministry of preferences to those who achieved outstanding results during the first three- to five-year period of experiences in local governments and ministry administrations. The major difference compared with the existing system lies in the fact that there is competition and competence development aspects to the new system.

The critical rationale behind the plan B is that unlike in the past, majority of people who are currently applying for the entry level recruitment examinations have at least bachelor's degree or more and generally show similar level of capabilities. In particular, due to the chronic unemployment problem, large portion of capable talents with higher education actually apply for the seventh-level entry recruitment examination. As a result, competency of seventh level applicants have gone up drastically and their work performances are, in fact, comparable to those

of public officials recruited through the fifth-level entry process, indicating that the recruitment system of distinguishing the fifth- and seventh-level entries is gradually losing its effectiveness. Thus, considering the minimal ability differences between the fifth- and seventh-level new recruits and the need to breakaway with structure problem of fifth-level entry recruits monopolizing high ranking positions, this new recruitment system of combining fifth- and seventh-level entry recruitment systems can be a promising alternative to the current system.

Although pros and cons between the plan A and B should be analyzed in more detail in the future, given that the plan A is more gradual transformation, a stepped approach could be suggested in which the plan A is implemented first, and then, depending on its result, the new system could incorporate the plan B.

4.2. Abolishment of the Career Path in Which Most Public Officials Serve for a Single Ministry Throughout Their Career

For practical implementation of personnel management reform of public officials, continued management of existing pool of human resources is just as important as recruiting new personnel and developing suitable training environments. Above all, to resolve the ministerial selfishness at the state of crisis, the career path in which most public officials serve for a single ministry throughout their career must be abolished.

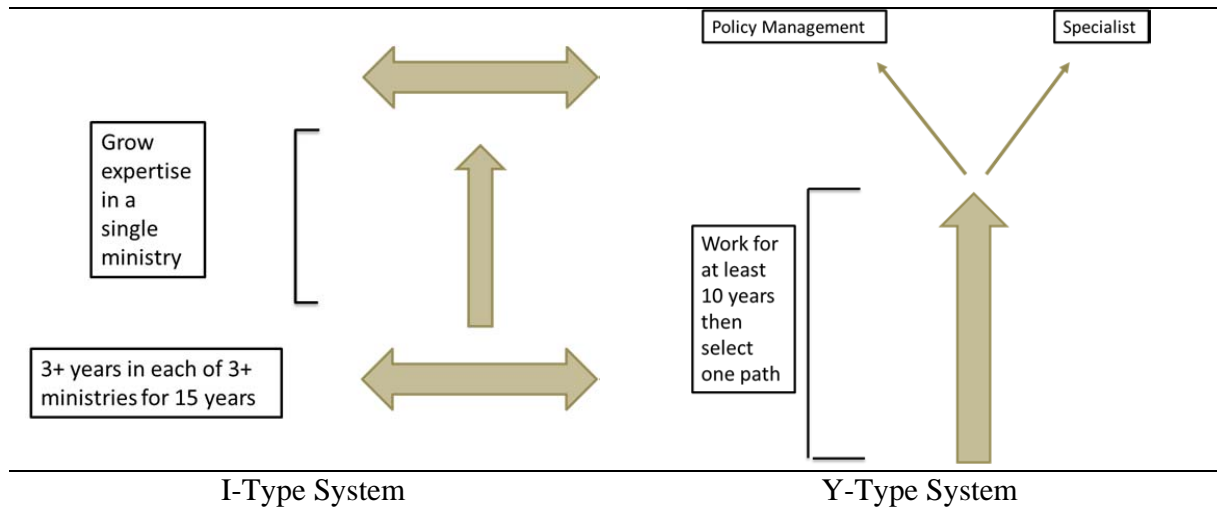
First option that can be considered is the I-type career system (Figure 4). This involves structuring the career path so that new recruits work for about 15 years in at least three different ministries for over three years each until they become a section chief. Then, they can work in one ministry till they promote to high ranking public officials at which point they can again rotate around ministries.¹⁰ Once public officials become high ranking officials, they can play critical roles in policy decision-making and management in number of ministries, allowing them to utilize their expertise, sense of political affairs, and leadership in holistic way.

Another alternative is the introduction of the Y-type career system, which was proposed by Kim and Shin (2009) and was once pushed forward by the formal minister of the Ministry of Personnel Management, Lee Gyun-myun, (Figure 4). This is targeted for public officials with 10 or more years of experience. Starting from the fourth-level position, Y-type career system can be employed in dual tracks as policy management officials and specialist officials. For the policy manager track, public officials for this track will be selected from seven task categories. Upon entrance, they may be given tasks for various ministries and be given incentives for high ranking positions down the line. As for the specialist track, public officials in this path would be promoted or transferred within the 30 categories of more specific tasks. Moreover, they will be encouraged to gain specialized knowledge and work skills in their particular areas of expertise and will be rewarded based on their work performance. Through this system, both policy management and specialist officials can move freely within the boundaries of their categories

¹⁰ We suggest 15 years in the I-type career system because it takes about 15 years on average to move from a fifth-level recruit to a section chief.

across ministries as required, overcoming the problems of old position rotation system¹¹ and enhancing task expertise.

Figure 4. Suggestions to Improve the Position Rotation System.



Comparing these two alternatives, the I-type career system has a clear advantage in that it can be applied to new recruits when it first begins, minimizing resistance upon introduction. Conversely, the Y-type has a potential side-effect of overcrowding policy management track which could appear easier to be promoted. In particular, while the policy management track has the incentive of high ranking public official position, it is difficult to setup an equivalent incentive for the specialist track. As such, the I-type career system is most likely more appropriate choice since it can also secure specialists through open recruitment without providing a separate specialist track as in the Y-type approach. One example of the open recruitment can be utilization of government-funded research institutions. As it is now, researchers who are part of the economic, humanities, and social science research in the government-funded research institutes tend to show low morale and autonomy because they are being ordered and controlled unilaterally by public officials in central government. Conversely, because public officials in the central government rely unilaterally on the government funded research institutions, they are not accumulating their own expertise. Thus, as a solution to this problem, promoting active personnel exchange programs between central government and government-funded research institutions could foster competency of both public officials and researchers. Another form of open recruitment can be inviting outside experts per project or mission for 4- to 5-year term and providing salaries that match those from private sectors.

¹¹ In the case of Korea, because of excessive position rotation, average term for section chiefs and higher last less than a year. This is severe short of optimal three years to comprehend missions of particular position and to build social network (third- to fifth-level: 34.4 months; less than sixth-level: 39.2 months; Kim, 2008).

4.3 Introduction of the Matrix Personnel Management System with Both Vertical and Horizontal Assessment and Promotion

In contrast to the past, today's administrative demand has become more complex and multi-dimensional, and there are more policy dilemmas requiring inter-ministerial cooperation. As such, public officials with well-rounded skills are high in demand. To deliver this administrative demand of the era, a drastic reform of system a matrix personnel management system should be introduced in order to reinforce competition among public officials based on competence and confidence.

First, the matrix system is based on limiting rotation of personnel by requiring at least three years of service in one position so that assessment and promotion for public officials could be based on the performance at the task that last long enough to be evaluated. More specifically, the assessment and promotion system under the four task categories will include both vertical and horizontal dimensions in the matrix system. In the vertical dimension, all public officials will be assessed by their superiors or colleagues within their ministries as was done traditionally. However, from the horizontal aspect, they will also be assessed at the same time by independent and external personnel management committee (or a minister-level organization under the prime minister's office). In other words, daily routines of public officials will be under the superiors of the ministry, but personnel management will be jointly conducted by independent personnel management committee that responsible for a specific task category and ministry superiors as in matrix-like system.

The deciding authority over personnel matters will lie in either the independent personnel management committee or in the chief of the policy planning department under the prime minister's office (minister-level) who receives recommendations by each minister of respective ministry. The matrix personnel management goes beyond the wall of each ministry by assessing public officials objectively against those in comparable task categories in addition to the personnel management conducted behind the closed doors of each ministry. It is expected that this kind of matrix system will not only resolve the ministerial selfishness of public officials but will also boost their political neutrality. Importantly, introduction of the matrix system will facilitate construction of a system that is based on competition with continuous accumulation and uses of objective data and evidence on competence and confidence of public officials. This could be complemented with a reward system of granting preferential priority over choices of ministries and positions for those who perform exceptionally in the objective matrix assessment system, giving much more fair incentives to public officials.

Discussing about the task category in more detail, in the past, seven task category matrix system for public officials were proposed (Shin & Kim, 2009: 214). Shin and Kim pointed out that existing categorization system is inadequate to guarantee expertise of public officials. They instead suggested 7 task categories which are a) general administration, b) industry and IT, c) diplomacy and national defense, d) land and environment, e) finance and economy, f) social welfare, and g) science, technology, and education. Based on these task categories, they

suggested that rotating public officials across ministries within given task category (Shin & Kim, 2008: 216). This system has advantages of being able to raise expertise of each task category and to oversee the personnel management reform across government structure in general.

Despite the advantages, however, it still is not sufficient to deal with the deep-seated social network formed by public officials in certain task categories coming from the existing fifth-level entry recruitment system. For example, the finance and economy category is already established as the 'elite career' within public officials recruited through the fifth-level entry process. Thus, there is a danger that there will remain closed exclusive social network if the finance and economy is kept as a separate category. As such, there is need to further reduce the seven task category system by eliminating its redundancy as well as improving linkage and efficiency of related tasks. Suggested here is a four task category system, which divides the category into a) general administration (e.g., the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Public Safety and Security, the Office for Government Policy Coordination, and the Ministry of Personnel Management); b) finance, economy, land, and environment (e.g., the Ministry of Strategy and Finance, the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, and Transport, the Ministry of Environment); c) international relations and national defense (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of National Defense); d) society, education, and culture (e.g., the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, and the Ministry of Health and Welfare).

V. Conclusion

This paper evaluated problems in personnel management system of public officials in relation to the changing administrative environment. Based on the assessments, a new talent management system for Korea's public officials was suggested to enable public officials to fulfill their mission as administrative experts.

Successful introduction of the new talent management system depends on the execution of the 3C strategy. Only through the strategies reinforcing competition, competence, and confidence, numerous problems including rank and seniority problem, closed recruitment of public officials, excessive rotation of positions, extreme ministerial selfishness, and weakening political neutrality of public officials, can be resolved.

In executing the 3C strategy, it was suggested in detail that three key reforms must be made happen. The first reform is the abolishment of entry level recruitment system at the fifth level. The second reform is the abolishment of the career path in which most public officials serve for a single ministry for entire duration of their career. The third reform is the introduction of the matrix-type personnel management system. Although each of the three reforms is a fundamental and drastic reform on its own, without implementing these reforms, it will be very difficult to address the highly complex and immense socioeconomic issues that Korea faces today. It is hoped that this paper would incite further in-depth public discussions and follow-up papers.

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