



# Confessions of a Waeguk Salaryman

## A story of fitting in to corporate Korea

By John P. Runyan

KS received an interesting story from John P. Runyan [not his real name]. John came to Korea to work as a programmer with a mid-sized firm and quickly found himself in a personal hell. Although there is no way of verifying the accuracy of his tale, we use his story here to introduce some expertise on fitting into corporate Korea from Tom Coyner. Tom is the president of Soft Landing Korea, a company that specializes in helping foreign companies get established here.

I began my programming career with a software company in Oregon and felt that life was good. But one day I met this guy in a bar who told me he was working for an overseas software company -- and that his salary was twice as much as mine!

It planted a seed, and so I began seeking out opportunities abroad. I wasn't having much luck with responses until an offer came in from an agent representing a Korean electronics company. The salary wasn't great (a little more than I was making at the time) but the agent piqued my interest. He regaled me with tales of "exotic Korea" and made it sound like a land of tremendous opportunity. "If you impress the right people, your second year here will be very lucrative."

My first mistake was in not asking enough questions. The details of the project seemed hazy, as did the terms of the contract. But I was smitten by the potential. So I mulled it over for a couple of days and then, after a few drinks with a friend, decided to accept the offer. Eventually I found myself on a flight bound for Seoul.

### Korean catastrophe

The contract was for one year, but I only lasted six months. It was one of the most difficult times in my life.

They set up a small private office away from the other programmers. "Special place just for you" they told me.

Right next door was the manager's office, a sour-faced man that ran his kingdom with an iron fist. In my second week on the job, he decreed that I begin to use timecards to log my hours. For "administrative purposes" was the explanation. He actually went out and purchased one, just for me to use. He placed it inside his office, so that every morning and evening, I had no choice but to go in there and stamp my card.

The environment in there was horrible: ripe with fear and tension. He was king. Programmers rushed in and out -- always seeming panicked -- while his office staff frittered about, catering to his every whim.

He was also the one who gave me my assignments and the details were always hazy. When I tried to get a big picture

grasp of the project goals, I was told "Please don't ask. Just do your assignment." So I was doing work without having any understanding of the overall project. I got a sense that he just wanted to keep me out of the loop.

It quickly became clear that I really didn't have any business being there -- except as a token foreign face. Although I did my best to fulfill my duties, the boss flat-out ignored what I did, and then seemed put out by having to give me specifications for additional assignments, as if it were a great inconvenience.

In the third month, he removed the computer from my office. Someone else needed it "for an urgent project". He then told me: "Well, I guess we must find something for you to do."

What he came up with was for me to teach English classes to other members of the company. I told him I was not qualified to teach. "Just talk to them. Just practice conversation. You are a native speaker." I didn't see any way to say no, so classes and a schedule were set up. My computer quickly reappeared, and that's how I became a programmer/English teacher.

It was a humiliating hell. Five days a week, I found myself fumbling through English classes from 7-9, then over to the office for programming work from 11-4, and off to teach another class at 8. Life became a blur. Work. Bits of free spaces in between (spent mostly researching grammar terminology online). Home at nine. Two beers to kill the pain. Rinse and repeat.

After about a month, I tried to bring up the subject of dropping the English classes, but the boss was having none of it. "But now you are so popular. And there is not enough programming work for you to do." When I tried the angle that the workload was too much for me, he told me to compensate by "doing yoga".

So I just plowed forward and tried to do my best. I kept telling myself that after a year of toughing this out, it would surely pay off. I was wrong.

## Unraveling

As the six-month mark approached, the boss accused me of misplacing a document. When I pointed out that I was the least likely culprit (for a bunch of reasons too mundane to get into here), I was told "It had to be you. It could not have been anyone else. It must have been you." With that, all of my obedience and good work seemed to be wiped away. In his eyes I was just a nobody.

For several days, he had his subordinates tear apart my office



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(while I was sitting there) looking for the document. When it was finally uncovered (in someone else's office), I went straight to him and let him know that I was, in fact, not responsible at all.

Finally! My chance for retribution! As if...

He looked at me as if I were an insect and then got up from his seat. He thanked me for the information, turned his back to me, opened the exit door to his office (back still turned to me) and let out a sing-songy "Thank you, bye byeeee." Not even looking

at me, he held up a hand in the air and waved me out, as if he were shooing a fly.

It might not sound like much on paper, but in the actual moment, it felt like he had slapped me in the face. I retreated to my own office and felt the anger rise. Went out on the balcony and had a smoke to clear my head. Even after a few minutes, I couldn't shake the feeling that I

had to say something. Enough was enough.

My knees were shaking. I took a deep breath. One step at a time, I made my way out of my office and walked into his iron-fisted lair of doom. There was only one office lady in there at the time. She looked at me wide-eyed, as if she knew what was coming.

I took a deep breath, stood in front of the boss' desk, and pointed a finger at his forehead.

## Meltdown

I didn't use any profanity, but was pretty strong in my language. "You are a horrible person" "This whole situation stinks!" "I have had enough of your arrogant treatment!" "I am not an animal!" etc. He took it all in stoically. I finished with: "Do you understand!?" He nodded, expressionless.

It took about two hours for my phone to ring. "Go home" my agent told me. "We will discuss the situation tomorrow. It looks bad."

The next day, I was told that it would be impossible for me to work there any longer and that my contract was being terminated. I was told to pack up my gear and get the hell out Korea before the week was up.

## Conclusion

The company was clearly mismanaged. By that I mean that there were no clear guidelines, no formal training, and no mentoring for the foreigner. There were a lot of assumptions on their part that I couldn't grasp. Luckily things worked out for me in the end.

Back in the States, I searched for 2 months, focusing only on companies that fit my exact criteria, and I made this clear at the interviews. Three job offers later I found one delightful place in the middle of nowhere that pays well and has a nice atmosphere to work in.

I am sure that there are progressive companies in Asia that protect their human resources and respect the employees instead of trying to squeeze the blood out of them. I guess you just have to search hard to find such a place and be better prepared than I was to fit into the culture.

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## KS Speaks with Tom Coyner, President of Soft Landing Korea (a consulting firm that assists foreign companies in doing business in Korea).

**KS: First, it seems as if Mr. Runyan simply had the misfortune of landing with a poorly run company. Is this a common occurrence?**

It is difficult to say the entire company is poorly run from the narrow perspective one gets reading this account. Rather, we see a personality and probably a culture clash between a young American and a middle-aged Korean. In this regard, this kind of conflict is fairly commonplace. Interestingly enough, as I have interviewed several people who are or whom have worked in Korean firms for an upcoming book, I noticed there seems to be a relationship between age/maturity of the foreign worker and the likelihood for a successful, if not entirely free of frustration, relationship with the Korean company. The older and more mature foreigners seem to “get it” better than the younger expats.

**KS: The way he tells the story, it seems as if he was coerced into accepting English teaching as part of his job duties. How could he have handled that situation without furthering the negativity towards him?**

Not knowing all the details, I think we need to consider how he ended up teaching English since he was originally recruited to be a programmer. Foreigners are usually not recruited to be token foreigners – even if that is the way many feel. They are recruited to be agents for change or subject matters experts since many Korean companies are trying to move away from having too many generalists. However, foreigners and Koreans alike are expected to make all possible efforts to fit in with the rest of the company; to become part of the team before contributing their special expertise. The classic conflict occurs when the foreigner starts feeling an obligation or even guilt in not providing the expertise for which he or she has been hired and makes an overt effort to volunteer that expertise before the co-workers and boss believe that the newcomer has been able to fit in and mesh with the rest of the group. When that happens, as it often does, there is a resentful backlash that confuses the foreigner. The foreigner then tries to adjust in an inappropriate way and only further alienates him or herself from the rest. Then, it is only a matter of time before termination takes place. In this case, my guess is that Mr. Runyan had not meshed all that well with the other programmers and the company assigned him to teach English to give him time to fit in with the rest of the company – or possibly they may have given up on him being able to get along with the other programmers and decided to use him as an English teacher. Just showing up and competently doing one’s job is usually not be enough to succeed or even survive in a Korean company.



**KS: If a person comes to work for a Korean company and finds that they are not fitting in right from the start, what can they do to steer the working dynamic in the right direction?**

The best course of action may be to befriend a coworker and take on an sincere attitude of humility that begins with blaming oneself of “not getting it” rather than blaming others. Try to get a sympathetic ear of someone who may become your ambassador - but even more important, be willing to listen and change your behavior according to your co-worker’s advice. Also, it is critical to try approaching one’s boss with humility and asking for his advice since he can do a great deal to help steer you back on course.

**KS: What do you think about Mr. Runyan being blamed for the missing document? How should his manager have handled that?**

My guess is when this event took place, Mr. Runyan had already alienated himself from some key people. Koreans generally like Americans but they tend to be a bit skeptical if foreigners can fit into their group. When the document came up missing, the foreigner was a likely suspect and his manager may have agreed. Ideally, his manager should not have jumped to conclusions. Others may have offered circumstantial evidence

pointing to Mr. Runyan. All managers make mistakes, including this one. He should have apologized to Mr. Runyan once the truth was discovered, but I would not expect in this kind of environment an elaborate apology.

**KS: Mr. Runyan ended up expressing his displeasure very directly to his manager and got fired because of it. How should he have handled the situation?**

The most obvious mistake was that he personalized the episode in terms of him being a victim and his boss being a bully. Rather, he should have attempted to use the event as an opportunity to illustrate how bad things had developed. He should have asked for professional and personal advice from his boss on how to prevent this kind of incident happening again – taking care not to insinuate the problem is with the boss but rather stating clearly the problem is between Mr. Runyan and the rest of his work group.

**Final question: What can an expatriate professional do to prepare themselves for their first assignment in Korea?**

In researching our book on doing business in Korea, I asked several expatriate managers and executives this same question. The two common most replies were first, read up on the basics of Confucianism as it has a strong influence on how people interact and what they expect of each other. Second, upon arriving in Korea, make what you may even consider to be extraordinary efforts and time commitments to get to know your co-workers and your boss in personal as well as professional terms. That includes, knowing about their families in detail, backgrounds, likes and dislikes, etc. Joining a Korean workgroup is very much like being adopted into a foreign family. The other “family members” will want to know everything about you and it is your obligation to take the initiative to learn as much as you can about everyone else. If you can “join the family” and not simply work at the Korean company, there is a good chance you will have a successful and even an enjoyable experience in Korea.

*Soft Landing Korea Ltd. specializes in assisting foreign high tech companies in entering the Korean market by providing sales channel management. They also serve as ombudsmen to explain as objectively as possible the ways of doing business in Korea to foreign companies. Tom Coyner can be reached at [tom@softlandingkorea.com](mailto:tom@softlandingkorea.com) or 011-9099-6195.*

*Mr. Runyan agreed to have his piece assessed and critiqued without any foreknowledge of the tone of the critique.*