

English Fluency Not Enough to be Successful at Global Firms

There are plenty of intelligent and hard-working Koreans, but strangely, there are very few successful Koreans working for top global companies. The gap has long bothered Cho Se-mi, a veteran organizational management consultant.

"Many Koreans are intelligent and have great talent, but it's difficult to meet successful Korean professionals on the global market. They have enough qualifications, but somehow their target is off," Cho said in an interview with The Korea Herald.



Cho Se-mi [Photo: Yang Sung-jin / The Korea Herald]

Cho has put out a Korean title on global talent which can be roughly translated into "The World Wants Talent Like This" (세계는 지금 이런 인재를 원한다; 264 pages; 10,000 won). The book, which has swiftly risen to the best-selling list at major bookstores here, maps out essential qualifications required for aspiring Koreans who want to be successful at top global firms. In the book, Cho sharply criticizes the country's longstanding craze for learning English, especially to the level of native speakers in terms of pronunciation. English is an important tool, but it's a shame that many Koreans regard their not-that-native accent and pronunciation as shameful.

In a global company where people of different nationalities and diverse English accents are common, it is not English but an effective and logical communication skill that matters most. Therefore, Koreans shouldn't be obsessed with acquiring proper English accent or attempting to "master" English as if everything depends on it.

So what's wrong with the mindset of Koreans? Cho said Koreans are hard-working and excel in what they are asked to do. But they lack a sort of independent mindset, particularly a positive drive to take the initiative.

"And we also lack a sense of pursuing excellence. We tend to think that this is enough, and just try to compete with colleagues in a company, rather than seek excellence," Cho said.

Such a mindset is a prerequisite for entering renowned global firms. The so-called "up or out" system adopted by top global firms means that every six months, employees go through evaluation processes and if they fail to improve, they are forced to quit.

But the system, which may be harsh for some Koreans, is not designed to produce workaholics. "It's about value. You give them opportunity to grow more and gain maximum potential," she said.

Cho stresses that top global companies have a support system that helps employees to balance their work life and personal life, and seek out those who have a diverse background and a desire to pursue excellence in many different aspects.

When global firms recruit new employees, they focus on whether job applicants have leadership, drive for excellence and problem-solving skills. And many Koreans fail on the logical and creative thinking.

Cho said Koreans wishing to enter such top global firms should develop logical thinking and communication skills. "Not the fluency of English but how to deliver the message and present yourself is important," she said.

Koreans tend to use sentences with "seems like" but this habit makes it difficult to get the message, which is not recommended when working for global companies where "to-the-point" communication techniques are in order.

"In global companies, there are lots of non-native speakers, many of whom feel less pressure about language than Koreans. I guess they are more flexible and easy-going," Cho said.

She suggested a simple test. If a two-hour meeting is suddenly canceled and you have to leave a short (preferably less than three minutes) voice message to your boss and yet sum up everything that counts, how would you handle that?

"You have to say 'This is what happened, and this is what I recommend and this is what I want from you,' and the message as well as the presentation style should be simple and understandable," Cho said.

When it comes to problem-solving skills, Koreans - or any other applicants for global firms - should sharpen their listening skills. "When we interviewed top talent at major universities in the United States and Europe, some people simply didn't listen to the questions we asked," she said.

An open-minded attitude also matters. In some cases, there could be many answers to a particular question, but some Koreans don't handle such open-ended questions creatively, she said. "Fluent English and good grades might get you an initial position at such global firms, but would not guarantee your success there unless you have the global vision and mindset," Cho said.

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