

Narratives of the New Mobility

"I think that this period is good because it is forcing Japanese young people to reexamine themselves and think about what kind of work they want to do."

– Principal at a low-ranking public high school

Reliance on institutional social capital to get a full-time job straight out of school worked well for many of Japan's youth throughout the post-war period. A school introduction to a job became a more common way of entering the labor market for graduates of every level of schooling during the post-WorldWar II period. Data from the Social Stratification and Mobility Survey introduced in Chapter 3 showed that a school introduction served the educational nonelite (high school graduates) well: Compared to their counterparts who found their first job through a different route, they were much more likely to land a full-time job in a large firm and to stay in that job for at least the first five years of their working life.

In short, individuals who drew on their school's social capital were more likely than others to be placed into a full-time job in a workplace that became their *ba*, the social location that identified them to the rest of Japanese society, often for a sustained period of time. University graduates' job search was similar in timing to that of high school graduates, with large firms recruiting early in the fall to secure the most desirable seniors for immediate postgraduation employment in the following April. In the U.S. such fervent recruitment activity takes place at the most elite private four-year universities and the most elite law and business schools in the country. But in Japan, it has been necessary for the government to

regulate the start of the recruiting year not just for university seniors but for high school seniors as well, because the hiring plans of large firms have been laid out so far in advance. Students' battle for good jobs is waged early in their senior year. And as Chapter 3 elucidated, in the post-war Japanese labor market a man's stable attachment to a firm has been an important vehicle for receiving on-the-job training at the employer's expense and garnering steadily increasing earnings.

Even so, some amount of mobility or job-hopping among workplaces has always existed for Japanese young people, despite international and domestic rhetoric that Japanese workers rarely change jobs. The normative template of employee commitment to one workplace is distinct from a more complex reality: Even in the context of a labor market where job-changing has been viewed with suspicion, a fair number of workers have consistently changed jobs in their twenties before settling into a longer-term job. To be sure, the Japanese youth labor market does not exhibit the high level of "churning" that American labor economists describe for the U.S. youth labor market. Japanese labor economists and sociologists have been surprised to observe that even in the tumultuous economic times since the early 1990s, the proportion of Japanese young people who change jobs within the first three years of leaving school has remained quite stable.

The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare reports that a quit pattern known colloquially as *shichi-go-san* (seven-five-three) has persisted across time. The pattern is that about 70 percent of junior high school graduates (a very small group at this point in time, given nearly universal rates of advancement to high school), 50 percent of high school graduates, and 30 percent of university graduates change jobs within three years of graduation. A perspective not mentioned by the Ministry is that the seeming stability of the seven-five-three pattern may be paradoxically indicative of a trend toward more frequent job-changing among the least educationally elite (junior high and high school graduates). Why? Because the denominator for such rates is the number of young people who entered full-time employment upon graduation. As I have shown, this is a number that has dwindled markedly in the past decade and a half, especially for the educational nonelite. Instead, the number of youth entering part-time employment, unemployment, or idleness (the state of being a NEET) has increased. This sheds new light on the persistence of 70 percent and 50 percent turnover, respectively, for junior high and high school graduates. Fewer and fewer of them are entering full-time jobs to begin with. So it is rather striking that turnover rates remain as

high as they do. These turnover rates are complemented by the increased instability in the youth labor market that is reflected in the numbers of unemployed and idle youth.

It is not completely clear what distinguishes job-changers from their counterparts who remain in their first postgraduation full-time job rather than switching to another one within three years. Somehow or other they are people for whom the initial job match was not a good one. As noted in Chapter 4, one possibility is that some of the young people who make a "successful" job match through their school actually end up being round pegs trying to fit into square holes. In such cases one might argue that the *anshin* or peace of mind felt by teachers in having moved students into jobs is associated with a false sense of accomplishment. On the other hand, perhaps it is more likely for graduates to suffer job mismatches if they find the job on their own, either through using personal social capital (strong or weak ties), or through searching the listings in job magazines or other outlets. We simply do not know for sure.

In many ways, the persistence or even increase in job-changing is not surprising. A striking theme in many of my interviews with high school teachers, especially at low-level general high schools, was their assertion that seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds are socially immature and are not necessarily capable of making well-informed employment choices. In my view, this cultural view is institutionally driven and encouraged. Socialized in an educational system that has traditionally focused students' attention more on fitting into society and, for young men, fitting into a company, young Japanese have not benefited from having to respond to the same kinds of questions thrown at American youth (questions that can, admittedly, be incessant) about what they want to do with their lives and "who they want to be." In a system fueled by institutional social capital, Japanese young people have been offered little incentive to develop interests and skills to bring to employers in an open labor market, let alone to further develop their particular capabilities over time by seeking new opportunities for moving across companies throughout their working life. Even if the first job doesn't "take," moving multiple times across companies has not been a strategy for establishing an upward earnings trajectory in the Japanese labor market. Moreover, as I showed in earlier chapters, the institutional social capital a young man activates to enter his first full-time job can be a protection against employer exploitation. If new young employees are badly treated and this news gets back to the guidance counselor or homeroom teacher who helped introduce them to the company, the firm's relationship with the school will be threatened.

In an institutional equilibrium where the entry-level labor market plays such a central role, schools have been the proverbial geese that lay the golden eggs or *kin no tamago* – new graduates.

But how about young men who do not land on their feet straight out of school? For men who for one reason or another end up in a poor job match, what are the alternatives to institutional social capital? The Japanese youth labor market has become increasingly fluid since the early 1990s and has come to encompass more and more possibilities besides stable full-time membership in a workplace *ba* – *junrō*, NEET, *haken* (short-term contract employment), *arubaito* (part-time jobs held by students as well as graduates). Because the landscape has become more complex, the strategies of young job-changers merit scrutiny.

In this chapter I relate the detailed narratives of three young men and explore the dynamics that underlie their stories. These three men were among the thirty or so who surfaced from the Youth Survey as individuals willing to be interviewed in greater depth. They have different educational backgrounds, different personalities and inner resources, and a range of employment experiences. Taken together, they illustrate the complex mosaic of strategies young men in the lost generation and beyond are using as they learn to change jobs and take chances in Japan's postindustrial labor market. Their narratives are messy counterpoints to so many of the well-patterned narratives of the postwar generation of men who moved smoothly from school into a *shokuba* or workplace with the aid of institutional social capital. In the narratives unfurled in this chapter, plans were made and didn't work out, or plans were not even made in the first place. As a result, the *ba* of school was not a place to which these young men could return to report and discuss the results of the school's guidance, even in the case of mistreatment by their employer (as in the second narrative I relate here). Instead, these men navigated on their own, and their explorations raise thorny issues that motivate the final chapter of the book.

SATOSHI: A TRADITIONAL ELITE STORY WITH A TWIST

In many ways, Satoshi epitomizes the image of a "successful" young Japanese man. After graduating from a high-performing public high school in 1995, he immediately entered one of Japan's most prestigious private universities. He graduated with an economics degree in 1999 and entered a career-track position in a large Japanese bank, where he worked about fifty hours a week with some additional overtime hours

during the busiest times. He had full benefits – a company pension plan, health insurance, and unemployment insurance – and lived in a company dormitory. The main way he acquired the necessary skills for his job was through his training in the company and his experiences working there.

Satoshi has mainly positive memories of his high school days, and can still list the names of about twenty friends from high school. He attended English classes at a private exam-preparation school during his high school years and did not do any part-time work. His high school prohibited students from working and Satoshi has a general understanding that part-time work is prohibited in most Japanese high schools. His confident statement of this as a fact is interesting in itself, as I have discussed in previous chapters that many low-ranking Japanese high schools in fact gave up their efforts at keeping students from doing part-time work in the 1990s. Satoshi's understanding that "students cannot work during high school" reflects his segregated experience in the upper reaches of the high school hierarchy.

Satoshi did hold some part-time jobs during his university years. He worked for a while in a supermarket – a job that he had found through a job-advertising magazine. The store was on the way to his university, so it was convenient for him to work there and make a little extra money. He also worked as an exam monitor in a cram school – a job he had secured by registering for the position and listing the name of the prestigious university he was attending.

The first interview we conducted with Satoshi was in 2005. At that time he expressed a desire to work longer hours and make a higher income. He was then twenty-eight years old. He thought the work he was given in the bank was interesting, and felt like the training the company was giving him was improving his skills and knowledge base. On the other hand, he was feeling that he did not have much of a chance to demonstrate his strengths.

When we asked Satoshi what he valued in a job, he expressed a preference to work for one company for a long time and to experience many different types of work tasks. He valued a high income, interesting work, and good relationships with his colleagues. He expressed a desire to get married when he finds a good marriage partner.

In answer to a question about what he imagined the most important thing in his life would be in five years (family, friends, personal life, the company where he would be working, or the work he would be doing), he replied that it would most likely be the work he would be doing.

Satoshi clearly has led a charmed life. He was born to highly educated parents and attended a top public high school and one of Japan's most prestigious universities. Satoshi's father is a professor at a public university, where he has spent his entire working life. His mother is also a university graduate and is a full-time housewife. Satoshi has two siblings, an older brother and a younger sister. Even though Satoshi graduated from university during the economically difficult years of the late 1990s, he landed a job in a major bank. In many ways, Satoshi seems to be very similar to the well-educated men in the cohorts that immediately preceded him.

But Satoshi is different in one key respect: When we re-interviewed him ten months later, he had quit his stable career-track job. Satoshi's new job is in a large Japanese trading company. Although his first job after university was a very good one by most standards, his remarks during our first interview had revealed that he did not feel that he was able to stretch his abilities and challenge himself. He stayed at the bank for six years and then began to search for another job that might suit him better. As he puts it, "I searched for a job in the normal way ... on the internet." After interviewing for another job and getting it, he informed his employer and then switched jobs. Once again he moved into a company dormitory. His job satisfaction is currently very high. As he says, "I often work overtime. But I am really satisfied with my job now, so I don't mind working overtime. Whether I can come home early or not is not really an issue."

What is significant about this portrait of a "typical" young successful Japanese man in his late twenties? What sets him apart from so many elite Japanese men of the 1970s and 1980s is that when he decided that his stable job in banking did not quite suit him, he went about looking for a new job that would be more challenging and a better fit to his talents. His income increased with the job change. The company to which he moved is less traditional than the first one he worked for. During his training period in the company his salary is tied to his age, and later it will become more dependent on performance than on seniority. Satoshi's reference to the Internet as the "normal" way of conducting a job search shows how he has adapted new technological tools to pursue his goals. Even his part-time jobs during university were found through relatively new job-search methods – job-hunting magazines and a registry for helpers at a cram school. Although he had many friends in high school and remains in contact with a number of friends from his main seminar at university, he has neither relied on strong nor weak personal ties in his job searches so far.

Satoshi has a great deal of human capital, comes from a well-educated family, and is actively pursuing what he wants to do – following a trajectory that is unconventional only in the sense that he is willing to take a chance and move out of his comfort zone to find a more challenging work environment with greater risk but also greater rewards. He has figured out the tools with which he can navigate a course through the “external labor market” that has developed in Japan in recent years – the labor market that exists outside of the firm-internal labor markets such as the one where he started his career.

THE BROADER VIEW: MOBILITY PATTERNS IN THE LOST GENERATION

Satoshi was one of a number of young men interviewed in my research, based on the sample of nearly five hundred young men that my Japanese colleagues and I surveyed in 2005 (the Youth Survey discussed in Chapter 3). For the first time in my research career, I hired a small number of research assistants to conduct these in-depth interviews of a small number of “informants” rather than doing the interviews by myself. I reasoned that Japanese men in their late twenties, particularly ones with nonelite educations (Satoshi was an exception in this regard among those in my in-depth interview pool), were likely to be more open and relaxed with a laid-back female Japanese interviewer of about the same age as themselves or a male American interviewer of a similar age. So the reference to “we” in my description of the interview with Satoshi refers to the interview experience as recorded and transcribed by the interviewer I sent to talk with Satoshi.

The Youth Survey of nearly five hundred men provides a picture of what was encountered by the men who left high school, two-year training school, or university in the mid-late 1990s and entered the troubled labor market at the time. The educational composition of the sample is, happily, very similar to the statistics based on the national sample of young men surveyed in the 2005 Social Stratification and Mobility (SSM) Survey, also discussed in Chapter 3.¹ By the time they were in

¹ About 36 percent of men in the sample did not go on for further education after high school. (A small number of these – about 3 percent – in fact did not finish high school at all.) Approximately 23 percent went to two-year training schools or some other type of advanced training school, and 41 percent went to university. The corresponding figures for the “lost cohort” surveyed in the SSM are strikingly similar (in Table 3-2, Chapter 3): 35 percent of high school graduates did not go on to higher schooling, 4 percent

their late twenties, about 11 percent of men in the Youth Survey had not held any full-time job since leaving school. The probability of not ever having worked full-time was highest among those who had attended two-year training schools (18 percent) and lowest among high school and university graduates (10 percent). This difference was statistically significant, meaning that both high school and university graduates were significantly more likely than other men to have had at least some full-time work experience by their late twenties.

Satoshi is an example of the university-educated young men who have done well in the labor market despite the rough economic climate. He represents young men with large amounts of human capital and “cultural capital,” what sociologists refer to as the demeanor and ways of behaving that denote comfort with being in the upper middle class (Bourdieu 1986). His clear intelligence, strong goals, and quiet self-assuredness are guiding him down a path slightly different from many of the men who preceded him in Japan’s corporate landscape. In my mind’s eye I contrast him with a middle-aged employee in a major Japanese bank who told me years ago that “Being in a large company is like bathing in warm water – it’s not very challenging, but on the other hand, it’s cold when you get out.”² The similarity between that description of work and the way Satoshi described his first job is striking. But Satoshi’s solution was to find a better alternative, and he marshaled his inner resources to do so. In that way, his choices are emblematic of a new way of life among some young Japanese men.

Among men in the Youth Survey, university graduates were much more likely than men of other educational backgrounds to have worked only in full-time jobs since leaving school. Sixty-three percent had done so, compared to just 50 percent of high school graduates and even fewer graduates of two-year training schools. Again, these figures are very close to those produced from the SSM Survey. Eighty percent of male university graduates had held only one or two jobs since leaving school – a figure about 20 percent higher than for high school or two-year training school graduates.

The next narrative is from Koichi, an example of a graduate from a two-year training school who had the good fortune to land in a full-time job when he graduated. But unlike Satoshi, his good fortune soured within a short period of time.

did not graduate from high school, 19 percent went to two-year training schools, and 43 percent went to university.

² I quoted this bank manager in a previous book (Brinton 1993).

KOICHI: FROM A CHARMED LIFE TO A STORY OF NEAR-DEFEAT

Koichi's story represents a dramatic departure from Satoshi's. Like Satoshi, he has been interviewed twice for my research. The first time we talked with him, he was twenty-seven years old, living with his parents and not working. He had had five different jobs, including the part-time job he had held in high school. Koichi was not very optimistic about his future and felt that the world was pretty much leaving him behind. He expressed the view that society is getting more and more complicated and that it is becoming harder to know what to do or how to fit in. All in all, it seemed life was not going very well for him.

Koichi graduated from a general high school in 1996 that is in the middle of the academic quality hierarchy in one of Yokohama's school districts. His classmates went in a variety of directions after graduating – some to university, some to two-year training schools, and some directly into jobs. He wasn't particularly close to any of his teachers, but he reported having had several close friends in high school and finding school to be moderately enjoyable. Koichi had sort of assumed he would go to university once he graduated. But during his final year of high school he became interested in cooking and decided it was really enjoyable. So he decided to go to a two-year training school that specialized in cooking. After graduating from the school, he got his first full-time job.

On paper, the job was a good one. He was hired as a full-time employee at a small food-manufacturing factory for a well-known Japanese company whose products are sold in the basement level [the food department] of many famous Japanese department stores. The product the company makes is easily identifiable, so it is not a name I will mention. As he puts it, "It's a very famous company, a very large company. They have counters in xx and xx department stores. So I thought it was a trustworthy company." The job seemed well suited to his interests, too. But once Koichi started working at the company, things did not go as he had expected. Within two months, he quit.

What went wrong? As he puts it, "Everything totally fell apart around me." Why? "There was only one reason: The work hours were obscene. I had to go to work at 7 AM and I would work until 3 AM. Plus, they didn't give me any days off per week – only about two days per month. At first they told me that I could have two days off a week. Once I started working, they told me it would be every other week. But we were so busy that I couldn't rest. I didn't even have time to sleep." Koichi said that often when they finished work the trains had stopped running for

the night, so someone in the factory would take him home. But once he got home, he had to go back to work at 7 AM. "So there was almost no time to sleep. At the company, during the breaks [a one-hour break at lunchtime and a 30-minute break in the afternoon], I would eat as fast as I could. There was barely any time and I sometimes just ate the edges of xx [the food product that he was making]. Then I would take a quick nap. At 6 PM we would punch out. Then after a thirty-minute break, we would start working again until our boss would tell us we could rest. It was endless. And there were no overtime wages."

Koichi explained the event that pushed him over the edge and was the immediate reason he quit: "The reason I quit was that one of my co-workers who entered the company at the same time that I did committed suicide. He was in the same situation as I was. In that type of working condition, people can go really crazy. He killed himself, and I received a phone call. It was on my day off. I said I would go into the company right away. I went in, and I told them that I wanted to quit. You would think that they would accept it, right? I mean, it was a crazy situation – a person had *died*! But they said, 'You still have a future here. Please stay and work. We don't have enough people now. Please don't quit.' The head of the factory, the section head, the boss ... all of them tried to keep me. But there was nothing they could do." The food brand was becoming more and more popular and the company's factories were under pressure to produce more products. Ironically, when Koichi quit his job at the factory, the company was short-handed but was not hiring regular employees.

At face value, Koichi's was a "good job." After all, he was working as a full-time employee for a name-brand company and using the skills he had learned at the postsecondary school he had attended. After he left the company, he fell into a depression. As he explained, "It was like ... just this one time in my life, I became a social isolate (*hikikomori*). I couldn't leave the house or see anyone. I couldn't go anywhere. I was scared of working, too – especially of having a full-time job. I was like that for three or four months. Now [several years later] I can laugh and talk about it, but I wasn't like this at the time. You know, it was the first job I had ever had, and I failed. And the way I failed was terrible. I lost my co-worker."

Later in the interview, Koichi said sadly to us, "My co-workers and I all gathered when the person died. But after that, I didn't contact them. I just couldn't. You know, he didn't have to die. Maybe he was weak"

The Ba of Adolescence: Responsibilities of the School. Several things are striking about Koichi's story of how his work life had begun. First of all, his employer did not adhere to the conditions that had been promised. As a result, Koichi and his coworkers were perpetually exhausted. Having gotten the job after graduating from a two-year training school, Koichi did not have recourse to the institutional backup of his high school that was described in previous chapters. There were no teachers waiting in the wings to make contact with the employer and ask what was going on. Instead, he was more or less on his own. His experience contrasts sharply with what might have happened in an earlier time period, when this type of job might have been filled by high school graduates recommended by the school to an employer. In that circumstance, Koichi would have been able to go back to his high school homeroom teacher or to one of the guidance department teachers and tell them that the job conditions were not what the employer had promised on the job announcement that had been sent to the school.

During my discussions with high school teachers at low-ranking high schools in Kanagawa prefecture, we had talked a lot about the relationships between schools and companies and the types of responsibilities that schools feel toward students. The following comment by a teacher is particularly applicable to stories like Koichi's:

There are some cases where the job does not match the description on the job announcement. This is illegal. For example, perhaps the company states that the person doesn't have to work on Saturdays and Sundays, but actually, they do have to work on Saturdays. Or perhaps the job is not at the company itself but at an affiliated company. In these cases, we say to the graduate 'it is okay to quit' or 'go ahead and quit.' Sometimes this happens within one month and if we have another company who needs someone, we can place the graduate there. Or we might say to the graduate, 'after you find another job and interview and get it, then go ahead and quit.' We help graduates in this way. We do the best we can to provide this kind of help if the graduate comes to us. We also tell the public employment security office about it.

I have shown in previous chapters that the high school-work system exerted social control over high school students. But this teacher's comments show eloquently how the high school-work system exerted social control over employers as well. It is important not to overlook this point. As Japanese students and graduates increasingly get jobs on their own – jobs to which they are not introduced by their schools – the employers that hire them are no longer under schools', or even public employment security offices', radar screens. Young people are increasingly on their

own. If the high school-work system were still functioning well, the school guidance department teachers might help the graduate if it turned out that the working conditions were not what the employer had written down. In this way, high schools exercised social control not just over their students but also over employers. Employers could acquire a bad reputation if they submitted job opening forms to the public employment security offices and to high schools that did not accurately represent the working conditions at the company. In addition, most of the guidance teachers with whom I spoke sorted through the job announcements sent to their school and separated out any that looked suspicious in terms of stating work conditions that were not good or work requirements that sounded strange. Often the teachers would put these job opening forms in a separate file and not even show them to students.

What is the appropriate level of supervision over young people's work trajectory? Have Japanese teachers been too controlling in "protecting" young people? Why not let high school seniors take their fate into their own hands? On the other hand, is it a good thing that high schools have exercised this kind of social control over employers? There is obviously a case to be made for both sides. But the fact is that as school-employer ties have declined and more young people have taken on part-time jobs during high school and entered the labor market on their own, Japanese employers have been subject to less social control by schools. The school's role as a stakeholder in the future of young people has been gradually usurped. Young people are fending for themselves.

One consequence of this shift in control out of the hands of schools and more fully into the hands of employers is that if graduates "fail," their only recourse is to blame themselves or their employer. Koichi blamed himself – "You know, it was the first job I had ever had, and I failed." In fact, he even blamed his co-worker who had committed suicide, saying "maybe he was weak." It is striking that Koichi blamed himself for quitting the company and even attributed his co-worker's death, at least in part, to personal characteristics. The working conditions he described seem intolerable, no matter how much the content of the job corresponded to his interests.

Koichi's attribution of blame to himself and to his co-worker rather than to external circumstances echoes his attitudes about what leads to success in life. Despite his difficult experiences, Koichi is like Satoshi in feeling that effort is more important than luck in determining success in life. Also, like Satoshi, he does not believe that life requires people to do dishonest or inappropriate things to get ahead. Despite his difficult initial

work experiences, Koichi has held on to the fundamental values he holds dear. But this has happened at a significant personal cost.

Personal Ties, Personal Decisions. After falling into a depression and becoming a borderline social isolate for four months, Koichi was able to rouse himself out of his depression and get a part-time job working the night shift at a convenience store. One of his friends was doing this, so he found a job at a different store and worked there for about four years. He says that during the first six months or so, he felt like he was doing it to get reintegrated back into society. Gradually, he started to feel better: "While working at the convenience store, I had a moment where I started to think, 'I'm okay now.' I was getting physically healthier, and I was able to sleep again." Once his confidence and health were restored, he began to think about what he wanted to do next. He did not want to continue working at the convenience store for a long time, but he felt that if he quit without another job in hand, he wouldn't be able to move forward with his life. Around that time, a branch of a retail-clothing store opened up near his neighborhood. He was able to get a full-time job there and quit the convenience store. The pay was okay (the yen equivalent of about \$1,600 per month, plus benefits and health insurance), the overtime hours were only four or five per week, and he had two days off every week.

At this point Koichi was able to begin thinking again about the kind of work he really wanted to do over the long term. "I was wondering what I should do, and how I could live. I was exploring what kind of job I wanted to do for the long-term. You know, I felt that as long as I could move forward gradually, it's okay." He got a job at a real estate office that handles rental contracts; then, after one year, he left the job. The other people who had entered the company at the same time also eventually quit, partly because the salary fluctuated so much. Just before he quit, he interviewed with a railway company that a friend worked for and liked. But he did not pass the third interview, which disappointed him. So he went to the public employment security office and was able to find a job, this time in a construction consulting company that advised construction firms on landing government contracts. That company had a policy that overtime work had to be less than thirty hours per week, but "Usually it would go over the limit. But at least I could get paid for 28 hours of overtime work or so, so it was okay." Koichi saw things about the construction industry and its relationship with the *yakuza* (Japanese gangsters) and the government that were hard for him to accept. So he left the job after working there for a little more than a year.

Like Satoshi, Koichi has not relied directly on other people to help him find jobs. Instead, he has used "Hello Work" (the employment security office) and job advertisements in magazines. Koichi does not have the amount of human capital, the socioeconomic background, or the upper middle-class cultural resources that Satoshi does. But he has not been beaten down by circumstances. He has thought hard about what he wants in his work life, and he has been able to get psychological support from some of the people closest to him. For example, he sought a job at a convenience store because one of his friends had worked in one and he learned from that person that the job was not too difficult (this was after he quit the food manufacturing company). Later, he interviewed at the railway company where a friend works. And importantly, his parents supported him psychologically while he recovered from the trauma of his job at the food-manufacturing factory. In fact, his parents had offered to help him pay for a motorcycle license, which seems to be one of the things that got him to go out of the house and break the vicious cycle of staying at home day after day, feeling bad about himself. Over time, his parents had gently encouraged him to get another full-time job at a company where he could work for a long time.

Koichi's parents did not require him to contribute financially to the household. Instead, they told him that if he contributed then they would save the money for him anyway and give it to him when he moved out. What seems to have saved Koichi is the combination of a supportive family and his own inner ability to move beyond his terrible initial work experiences and go forward and explore different jobs to see what he really wanted to do.

When we interviewed Koichi ten months later, he was in his fifth and current job, working for a company involved in environmental concerns. He is very satisfied with the job. To him, the working conditions, the salary, his co-workers, and the work hours (two days off per week) are fine. As he says, "I'm confident that I can keep doing this job. I feel I can do this for the rest of my life. I found a job about which I can feel this way."

Koichi is thoughtful about his work experiences in life so far. As he puts it, "It took me time to find a job that suited me. But you can't quit a job right away, right? You know, people think it's strange. So I tried to stay in most of my jobs [except the food manufacturing factory] for at least a year. Now I've finally found a job that suits me very well. I don't feel that it's because of my own improvement or anything, but rather because of my experiences doing different types of jobs. If I had entered this company without those experiences, I might have thought it was not

perfect for me. But because I know what didn't work for me in the past, I can see that this is the best fit for me so far. In that sense, I feel it was good that I had these experiences. I did sales, customer service, worked at a convenience store, and so forth. Some people can find their perfect job without trying out different kinds of jobs, and some people can't."

HIDEKI: WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM HIS FRIENDS
(AND WEAK TIES)

Hideki has had yet a different set of experiences and has used other strategies to find satisfying work than either Satoshi or Koichi. We first interviewed him in 2005 when he was thirty years old. Hideki graduated from a low-ranked general high school from which very few graduates went to university; many more went to two-year training schools or tried to enter the job market. Hideki remembers a large number of friends – about fifty – from his high school days, and he is still in contact with about fifteen friends from middle school. He was active in soccer club throughout his high school years. He did not do any part-time jobs during high school except for short-term jobs during the summer and winter breaks. But his first job after graduating was part-time. We asked him about the circumstances that had led to this, and he explained what was going on at home and in his own thinking during high school.

Hideki's father is a university graduate. Throughout Hideki's childhood, his father and uncle ran a small software company. But when Hideki was in his late teens, his father closed down the company: "It was in the middle of the recession. There was no business, and no point in continuing. So before the company went into the red, he closed it down. After that, he took a job as a driver in the carrier business." Hideki continued: "My parents came to the end of their rope back then. I had been thinking about going to university but we had not talked about it much. I decided on it rather late – around October or November of my senior year in high school. We talked about it and found out how much it would cost. But when I understood my parents' financial situation better, I said that if that was the situation, I wouldn't go to university. After all, it wasn't that I wanted to study something in particular. I realized that going to university would cause a lot of financial problems for my parents. But I was not using the career guidance at my high school for job-hunting either. In a way, everything was too late."

For these reasons, after graduating from high school Hideki took a part-time job in a small company that overhauls vending machines.

He found the job through a job search magazine. After two years the company asked him if he wanted to work full-time. He thought about it seriously but decided that the company was not stable enough and that the work was not what he wanted to do over the long term. "When the company suggested that I become a full-time employee, I thought about a lot of things. I also consulted with my friends. When I seriously thought about what I wanted to do, I sort of thought I wanted to do aircraft maintenance. A friend of mine referred me to a job in the airport. But when I got there, I discovered that the job was not at all what I expected – it was a job at the counter of a travel agency! But anyway, I thought to myself: 'Since it is a job at the airport, there may be other opportunities here as well.' Rather than having nothing, I thought it was better to take this job and see if I could make some connections through the job."

Hideki's easygoing, extroverted nature and his practical approach to life were particularly clear in the second interview we had with him. He had worked at the airport travel counter for six months. During that time he was talking to one of the more senior employees at the job, discussing the fact that he wanted to work on the airfield doing things related to aircraft maintenance. As he told us, "I did not live near the airport. But my co-worker did, so I asked him if he could bring 'help wanted' ads to me from his local newspaper. I thought there might be more job ads for positions in the airport in that newspaper than in the one where I lived. I found my current job that way. When I saw the ad, I told him about it and he said that I should call them right away and ask about the job. We'd been talking about that sort of thing for a while." So Hideki quit the travel agency job and moved into the job of airplane mechanic. The company hired him as a contract worker and one year later, he was able to become a full-time employee. The company has provided quite a lot of training and he feels like he has been able to develop many skills.

Hideki's current job is therefore the third one he has had since leaving school. He is a full-time employee in a medium-sized company that services airplanes. Hideki works about forty-five hours a week and makes the equivalent of about \$30,000 a year. It is not a high salary, but Hideki likes his work. He feels that he is able to develop and use his abilities and has been able to do interesting work so far. When we asked him what he values most in his work life, he said that it is the opportunity to do interesting work and to have good relationships with his colleagues. The other things he values in a job are possibilities for promotion and a higher income, a convenient commute, and little need to worry about becoming unemployed.

Hideki feels fortunate in many ways. Among his friends, he doesn't know anyone else who has been able to become a full-time employee after starting out in a part-time job after graduating from school.

After seeing what his father went through, Hideki does not have a desire to be self-employed. He respects his father: "He supported us by running his own business. I think he was paying his employees as much as he could so that they could eat for all those years. In that respect, he had a lot of responsibilities. It is amazing that my own parent was doing that." Reflecting on his parents' situation during those years, he says, "They didn't show it much, but I think it was tough for them."

Hideki is unusual in that he got married at a fairly young age (twenty-five) for men in his cohort and already has two young children. He and his wife and children live in an apartment. He expresses satisfaction with all aspects of his life so far. Just like Satoshi and Koichi, Hideki does not think it is necessary to do dishonest things in order to get by, and he too feels that effort is more important than luck in order to succeed in life. Unlike what Koichi said when we interviewed him the first time, Hideki does not have the feeling that life is leaving him behind.

In terms of whom he says he would rely on in times of need, Hideki is like many of the other young men we interviewed – he would turn first to his family for help in trying times such as when he is ill, has financial problems, or has problems with other people. But unlike most of the other young men in my research, Hideki says that his friends would be the ones he would be most likely to talk to if he were feeling down.

What does Hideki's story illustrate? And how do we "connect the dots" across the stories of these three young men? Hideki, the high school graduate, got a slow start on planning his next steps after high school, and did not use his schools' guidance department for his initial job search. But of the three men, Hideki is the most extroverted and adaptable. When a job situation did not work out for him, he talked to friends and consulted with co-workers to get information and advice. He utilized a combination of strategies in job hunting, including asking his co-worker to bring in job advertisements from the local newspaper. This contrasts with Satoshi, who used the Internet to make the one job change he has made so far. It also contrasts with Koichi, who has used a variety of resources to manage his pathway in the labor market. Koichi relied on his empathetic parents for financial and psychological support during a several-month long period when he was not working and was on the verge of becoming a serious social isolate. In his job searches, he has relied on job advertisements, on encouragement from friends who have had positive

work experiences, and on the public employment security office. None of these young men have held just one job since they graduated.

How can we interpret the ability of these three very different young men to adapt to the changed employment environment in Japan and to eventually land on their feet? Do their experiences constitute evidence that the lost generation will thrive, even though the security of the school-work transition system and the promise of stable employment have more or less dissolved? This is the question I consider in the final chapter.