

From Keyboard to Kitchen

By Ato Ekusa

The Japanese economy appears to be getting worse by the day. Indeed, the situation looks so bad that people are now talking about the "complex recession," a play on the expression "complex pollution," coined by one author to describe the many levels of dirtiness around us.

Reeling hard from the effects of the burst bubble, and the financial scandals that accompanied it, is the computer industry, and especially the systems houses that provide the software for the machines. The biggest customers of these systems houses used to be banks and securities companies, which developed their businesses around on-line systems. But the unprecedented recession has taken its toll, and work has dried up.

Enterprises in the systems house business vary enormously in size, from large concerns like CSK Corp., which has nearly 7,000 employees and is listed on the First Section of the Tokyo Stock Exchange, to small firms with only a president and a single employee. At a rough estimate—even the government lacks any accurate figures—the number of systems houses in Japan is about 300,000 and the number of employees about 600,000.

In the wake of the severe recession in the financial industry, small systems houses have gone bankrupt one after the other. A few years ago, at the height of the boom, systems engineers were in heavy demand. Their fee for being dispatched to companies in the financial industry was a hefty ¥600,000 (\$4,600 at the rate of ¥130/\$) or ¥700,000 a month. Now they rake in less than half of that—about ¥250,000 to ¥300,000. In the last couple of years an estimated 150,000 firms, mostly small and medium-sized ones which traded only with private businesses, and 300,000 people have been forced out of the systems house business.

The systems houses that remain, meanwhile, have had to search for ways to ensure their survival. Among the various strategies that have been followed, one

stands out as especially remarkable. For some reason, a lot of systems engineers have joined the food business.

In Nagoya, three systems engineers in their late 20s, after losing their jobs at a systems house, put together the funds needed to open a fast-food store near the university they had graduated from. These three engineers claim that cooking is an excellent remedy for relieving stress. "We used to be doing brainwork all the time, banging away on the keyboard," explained one of them. "Cooking is much easier. You just stick the ready-made meals in the microwave oven and press a button. It's an excellent way to give your brain a rest."

One systems house in Tokyo's Ueno district, which had a staff of about 80, laid off about 15 employees—starting with those who had not made the grade. According to the relieved owner, these employees went away without making any fuss at all, probably because the media had played up the recession so much and already driven the message home.

Faced with the need to rationalize even more, this systems house then opened a lunch-box shop and small restaurant in Tokyo. The company sends out five engineers to run the lunch-box business from early morning to midday and about 10 young technicians to operate the small restaurant from early evening, the idea being to reduce the personnel expenses of the systems house and have the engineers earn their own bread (as it were) outside in the culinary trade.

Moving from the keyboard to the kitchen, these computer specialists, men and women, keep themselves busy by grilling mackerel and filling plastic lunch boxes in the daytime and making Chinese salads with sticks of bean jelly and other relishes at night. They might be shaky when it comes to chopping with a kitchen knife, but the communication with customers seems to more than make up for the move. As one engineer put it, "It's a delight to be able to chat with the custom-



Lunch box vans are becoming increasingly common. Amid the economic slump, computer software firms are entering such businesses.

ers. I used to do nothing else but stare into a computer all day."

Behind this switch to the food trade lies a change in legislation. It is now possible to operate an eating and drinking establishment without a cooking license, as long as one of the staff is qualified in food hygiene control. This qualification can be obtained in a couple of days by attending lectures at a local public health center.

Another factor in success stories like the one in Tokyo mentioned above has been a shift in the preference of today's young people from Western cuisine such as hamburgers, which they have tired of, to Japanese cooking. And salaried workers themselves, buffeted by the winds of the recession, are only too happy to keep down their lunch bills.

The lunch-box shop also takes lunches by van to office districts in Tokyo. It is prohibited for reasons of hygiene to sell lunch boxes on the street, and the police soon move offenders on. Nevertheless, lunch-box vans have begun to pop up with increasing frequency in the business and government agency centers of Tokyo, such as Kasumigaseki and Otemachi. The reason probably lies in the changed tastes and circumstances of office workers in Japan today. ■

Ato Ekusa is a free-lance reporter based in Tokyo.