Global Essay Competition 2026

Title: **From Face Time to Family Time: How AI-Driven Management Can Reverse Demographic Collapse in South Korea**

Essay:

Introduction

The streets of South Korea are bustling with innovative technologies, AI robots in restaurants and 5G networks quickly becoming the norm. But on those same streets are office buildings, flooded with ordinary people confined in a culture that is nothing short of feudal. Their everyday life is dictated by a Confucian hierarchy: a rigid, inefficient, and rank-based system, where not only individuals pay the price, but society as a whole. The costliest loss is one that never arrives: the future generation. In 2023, South Korea's total fertility rate plummeted to a record low of 0.72 (Yang et al., 2024), well below the needed population replacement level of 2.1 (Yun et al., 2022). This multi-year trend can be attributed to various factors (OECD, 2025). Ultimately, scholars identify work-life imbalance as the primary driver.

Policy makers have tried to buy their way out of this crisis, pouring billions of dollars into childcare subsidies (McCurry, 2024). Unfortunately, these are only temporary band-aids, addressing the financial burden of raising children, rather than the deeper wound of collapsing quality of life. This is not an economic failure, but a cultural one. The real barrier to forming families is a work culture that demands and rewards performative loyalty, valuing presence in the office and drinking after work over actual productivity. In a system where leaving on time is an act of rebellion, balancing a career and family becomes fundamentally impossible.

Reversing this demographic collapse requires a radical change, a break in an ironclad structure that has been built over centuries. Technology is the answer. More money isn't. By using technology to not only automate mundane tasks, but automate management itself, a transition from hierarchy to meritocracy stands a chance. Empowering AI to evaluate performance based on data, rather than at the discretion of a superior, will dismantle the rigid seniority system and create a workplace that's fair and stable enough to support a family.

The Problem

Understanding why South Korea's cradles remain empty requires moving beyond balance sheets and into the psychology of the office. The country falls victim to a crippling paradox. In 2023, the OECD recorded that South Korea had an average of 1,872 hours worked, 132 hours more than the global average of 1,740 (OECD, 2026). At the same time, hourly labor productivity was recorded at just $51.10, ranking 24th out of 37 OECD countries (C. Kim, 2025). Longer hours do not correlate with greater effort, or higher volumes of work. It simply means the culture values presence over performance. This gap is heavily enforced by kkondaes and is where family time goes to die. Kkondaes are condescending, older managers who view the office as their own personal kingdom, using face time as a measure of personal loyalty and leverage (S. Kim, 2019).

Shielded by a rigid seniority system, kkondaes are free to act with impunity, cultivating a culture of gapjil, or power abuse, where subordinate's time and freedom are controlled, often leading to humiliation (U. Park, 2025). This forces employees to navigate their day through nunchi, the exhausting art of reading the room and gauging others' moods to maintain harmony, wasting hours on performative busyness, trying to avoid the social sin of leaving before the boss. The office quickly turns into a theater of inefficiency, where the employee's goal is not to finish the task at hand, but to practice endurance.

But the day does not end. The abuse of time continues beyond the walls of the office through hoesik, or mandatory after hours drinking with colleagues. Managers have claimed for decades that these alcohol-fueled dinners are critical for team bonding, but statistics show juniors feel differently. 44.9% of workers expressed a desire to refrain from after-work gatherings following the COVID-19 pandemic, which gave workers an excuse to avoid such events (Nam, 2021). Hoesik became less about

building communities and bridging colleagues, and more about taxing private lives and weighing heavily on those waiting at home.

The primary victims of this system are working mothers who fight a daily war on two fronts. In the eyes of kkondaes, a woman's decision to become a mother is a liability, a direct violation of loyalty, and the animosity is often clear. A civic group named Gapjil 119 recently shared an anecdote where a female employee was warned by her employer: "I'm trying to promote you, so don't stab me in the back with a pregnancy" (Seo, 2024). This was far from the only story of the sort.

This brutality forces women into impossible dilemmas where they must decide between their career and motherhood. For those who attempt to juggle both, a child waiting to be tucked in at bedtime and a boss and colleagues seated around a table littered with empty bottles, hoesik culture pushes them out of the social circle.

Employees don't rebel. They simply resign. The younger generation realized that sacrificing their lives for the company is a lost cause, supported by a "quiet quitting" rate of 57.1% (The Straits Times, 2024). They may sit in the office, nod along to orders, and do the work physically, but mentally, they've fully checked out. Critically, they are refusing to have children that will become the same dispensable pawns at the hands of their superiors. The collapse in the demographic is not an accident, but rather a rational consequence of a workplace culture that approaches life with hostility.

The Solution

If South Korea's demographic collapse is dependent on the culture of subjective face time, then the solution is to shift to objective measures. This can be done through artificial intelligence, pivoting from a workplace governed by nunchi to a data-driven meritocracy. Currently, managers demand long hours because they use it as a metric for output. Here, presence becomes a direct measure of productivity. In actuality, the correlation is abysmal. AI has the opportunity to eliminate any ambiguity between perceived productivity and reality by deploying advanced project management tools. These tools can autonomously assign tasks, track progress in real time, and verify the completeness of tasks based on data, rendering the kkondaes obsolete. Once the algorithm confirms that a code is bug-free, or a presentation is complete, the employee's obligation to the company is, very technically, fulfilled. AI doesn't care if a parent leaves early to pick up their children, or if a company dinner is skipped to tuck them in. Even more so, it can't hold a grudge. Accountability is fair, backed up by data rather than human emotions, signals over noise. To prevent the emergence of an AI gapjil equivalent, rigorous, unbiased inspection must ensure that performance is not measured by hours spent in the office , but rather solely by data supporting task completion.

This is not some sci-fi solution. AI has already proven its power in the South Korean workplace. Conglomerates like POSCO have already adopted AI-based interviews to improve the talent acquisition process (J. Kim et al., 2025, Abstract). The results speak for themselves: a 2025 survey conducted with managers at top 500 companies found that 86.7% of major corporations use AI for employee personnel work (S. Park, 2025). 74.5% plan to introduce or utilize these AI tools in hiring processes in the future. AI implementation in recruiting eliminates the leverage of traditional connections, yielding a new level of fairness. If AI is already trusted by major conglomerates to hire the best talent without prejudice, then the logical next step is to enable it to manage them.

The economic argument is just as critical as the cultural one. A system operating on a "long hours, low output" basis is as much a mathematical failure as a societal one. Various studies have highlighted the growth that generative AI has the potential to unlock, an incredibly powerful opportunity for an economy that faces a shrinking workforce. McKinsey and Company emphasizes AI's tremendous impact, explaining that AI has the capacity to automate tasks that take up to 60-70% of a worker's day (Chui et al., 2023). Through the use of generative AI, "labor productivity could see a growth of 0.1 to 0.6% annually through 2040", and "combining generative AI with other technologies, work automation could add 0.5 to 3.4 percentage points annually to productivity growth".

AI opens the door for a new asynchronous work style. A parent can complete their AI-assigned tasks for the day between the hours of 9 a.m. and 3 p.m., leaving the rest of the day free for family time and childcare. The stigma of leaving early fades as performance metrics show 100% completion.

This is the technological disruption the country needs for real change, a forced decoupling of work from the office. Replacing the tyrannical manager with an objective machine gives life back to a workplace, where the value a worker adds is what matters, not how many hours they've sacrificed.

The Future

This technological shift is not a last-ditch compromise, but a liberation. To put this into perspective, imagine Jin, a 30-year-old father working a job in corporate finance in Seoul. In the future, he walks into the office at 9:00 a.m., and instead of sitting with dread, dragging out his tasks to prolong his face time, he sits in his chair and works diligently on his AI-generated task for the day: analyze and model this week's financial data. At 2:00 p.m. he finishes, and by 2:01 p.m., his AI project manager marks his work as satisfactory and considers him "complete" for the day. Jin closes his laptop and leaves to pick up his kids from school, guilt-free. This is no longer a favor he had to call in, or a scolding he had to endure. It's his right. In this new workplace, Jin is no longer a guest in his own family, but rather an active participant.

Skeptics may consider this an oxymoron, both utopian and dystopian in nature. But data has shown time and time again that this is the road forward. Other countries have reaped the benefits of shorter, more strategic work days. In Japan, a country also facing complex workforce issues, a Microsoft subsidiary experimented with a shortened, four-day work week (Eadicicco, 2019). This resulted in an impressive 40% increase in productivity. The math checks out: well rested humans perform better than exhausted humans working in fear (Bui et al., 2021).

This new vision will allow South Korean society to redefine what makes them a developed nation. Historically, South Korea has used technology to improve efficiency in industrial outputs. Now, it has the chance to restore the next generation. The AI managers proposed are not heartless overlords, but rather shields for everyday people against the mood swings of the hierarchy. They create a barrier that kkondaes have no capacity to breach. In this future, the clacking of keyboards at midnight is replaced with children laughing, as they play with their parents at home.

Conclusion

South Korea is at a crossroads. For 20 years, the nation has attempted to resolve cultural issues with economic tools and political interventions, pouring billions of dollars into subsidies that fall short on impact. No monthly check has counteracted a life consumed by the office. While traditional legislation cannot monitor every hoesik, or arrest every kkondae, the passing of the AI Basic Act in 2026 marks a pivotal moment, acknowledging the power of the AI industry, and offering meaningful metrics for regulation (Ministry of Science and ICT, 2024).

For those who argue this is a step towards dehumanization, it is not. It is a step towards restoring humanity in an otherwise exploitative system. Artificial intelligence has the capacity to end the subjective biases, forced drinking, and standards of performative face time that have shackled the possibility of the Korean family, and offer a sense of protection through objectivity.

This will be no easy change. Disputes will likely arise between the old and new generations. Those who patiently endured years under kkondaes and finally rose to the top of the corporate ladder will be hesitant to relinquish their authority and become equals to peers decades younger and inexperienced. While the transition may be painful, the alternative is excruciating: the dying out of a society. There are two roads ahead: latching on to the status quo, believing things may get better, and continuing to watch thousands of schools close down as the population dwindles (Jung, 2025), or embracing bold change. And here, the noise of discomfort must always outweigh the silence of empty cradles.

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