

SUNDAY FEATURES

SUNDAY, JUNE 21, 2009

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Busy

day at work? No time

to pick up a present for a friend's birthday? You don't need a secretary — just contact one of Taiwan's thousands of errand runners. They will not only buy a tie for your dad, pick up a cake from the bakery, or line up for hours to secure a pair of limited supply Levi's, but also sweep your deceased relative's grave or even pose as a pseudo boyfriend to fool your parents.

In these tough economic times, errand running, a profession that began a few years ago in Taiwan, is a mushrooming business.

There are about 1 million people registered as errand runners in Taiwan and 10,000 active runners, according to the estimates of industry experts. Short-term work assignments, which usually pay NT\$150 an hour, are helping many people survive the economic downturn.

"With the economy being bad, we've actually seen a higher demand for errand runners because companies want the cheapest cost, so they hire us instead of say a delivery company, which charges more," said Lawrence Lee (李政達), founder of Parttime (跑腿幫), the first errand running group in Taiwan.

For no fee, anyone can register online to be an errand runner. If they want benefits entitling them to business cards and insurance against broken or lost items, they only need to pay a one-time fee of NT\$1,000. There are no middlemen fees.

And all they need is a computer and access to Web sites where errand requests are posted. The first to reply to a customer's online request usually gets the job.

The only job qualification is that one be flexible and punctual.

"In 2004 when we started this group, we had only a handful of members, now we have 30,000 members and about 3,000 active members," said Lee, whose group is one of Taiwan's biggest.

"This is a reflection of the economy," Lee said.

Some of the errand runners had been laid off from factories, while others had been unable to find stable work for some time.

TWO BIRDS, ONE STONE

It's a profession that allows them to make ends meet and kill time while continuing to look for a more stable job. They also get to meet a wide variety of people. Some tasks, such as waiting in line for an item, even allow errand runners to do other things at the same time, such as returning phone calls or writing music, as one of them is doing.

Chang You-wu (張耀五), 35, one of the best-known and most successful errand runners in Taiwan, manages to make NT\$30,000 to NT\$40,000 a month, which helps him and his wife pay their NT\$20,000 a month mortgage.

His favorite job is lining up.

"The longest time I've lined up is 24 hours, for 12 days. It was for tickets for Taiwan's pop band Mayday's (五月天) concert last December. There were only 100,000 tickets available. I held 100 people buy tickets. I could only run off for brief bathroom breaks, I couldn't take showers, so I took a bottle of water to wash myself," Chang said, adding that he made tens of thousands of NT dollars that time.

"To be a successful *pao tui* (跑腿) (Chinese name for errand running), the more you know, the more opportunities you have," Chang said.

Most errand runners have no problems making at least NT\$3,000 to NT\$5,000 a month, while the average is around NT\$20,000 per month, Lee said.

Lately, because a lot of people have been laid off or put on unpaid leave, and are consequently turning to running errands for a living, there has been increased competition for assignments and the profession is not as lucrative as it once was.

"It's hard because there are too many errand runners and you must face the computer every day

to catch the jobs," said Chang.

One errand runner, Cheng Sun (程俊), a 29-year-old who used to work at a factory that has relocated to China, said he was unemployed for a year before he became an errand runner.

"This is unstable income, but as long as you're willing, there are opportunities. Sometimes I make more than what I used to make in the factory," said Cheng.

The biggest challenge is meeting customers' various demands, Cheng said.

"Sometimes at 2am, they would like a pork rib takeout meal. If you don't go out and get it for them, then next time they won't call you," said Cheng.

On a recent day, he waited in line all night for one client, slept for just three hours, and then got up to help another client paint an apartment.

"I don't mind. I need to make more money because my girlfriend will give birth in August," Cheng said.

Others are spying on the prices of their clients' business rivals, looking for lost pets, representing busy clients at wedding banquets, burning incense at temples, going on blind dates to check out the other party, making doctor's appointments, delivering flowers, and showing up to sing *Happy Birthday*.

Errand runners are paid extra if they do difficult tasks such as waiting in line overnight.

The highest amount paid to an errand runner is reported by local media to be NT\$1,200 an hour. However, that was an unusual case in which the errand runner rushed to deliver a forgotten item to their client at the airport.

Some assignments can be repetitive, such as dialing up a telephone number repeatedly to make an appointment with someone popular, such as a fortune-teller at a temple.

Lee believes this profession could one day result in a narrowing of the growing wealth gap in Taiwan because it allows low-income people with lots of time to trade their time for money without the hassles of traditional jobs.

"In traditional job markets, you have to go through job interviews and take tests and the middleman ends up taking a chunk of money from you. Without the need for a middleman or company, this allows people to make money easier and faster," Lee said.

"If Taiwan can promote the errand economy, then Taiwanese society will be more normal. It will destroy the M-[shape] society [where the rich get richer, the poor get poorer and the size of the middle class decreases]," Lee said.

Regardless of how rich the rich get, they still always need to help people to help them because they have no time, Lee added.

"More and more people are hiring errand runners," Lee said. "Whether it's the middle of the night or in a rainstorm, the errand runners get the job done. People are very thankful."

JOB SATISFACTION

For errand runner Cheng, the joy of the job is more valuable than the NT\$30,000 to NT\$40,000 he makes on average each month. For one of his assignments, he picks up and delivers prescriptions for people with chronic illnesses who are immobile and need medication regularly, but whose family members are too busy.

"They, especially the elderly people, are really happy to see a young person coming by to help them," Cheng said. "It feels like I'm helping people, like I'm doing social work sometimes."

Meanwhile Chang has grand plans. "I want to make it international, to help the many people who need jobs. I want to set up a global errand running service in Singapore and mainland China," Chang said. "To me it's fun, makes money and helps people."

Note: If you need an errand runner, post a request on www.parttime.com.tw.

All in a day's work



Above: Errand runners are pictured on the job. An estimated 1 million people are registered as errand runners in Taiwan.



Right: Lawrence Lee, founder of errand running group Parttime.



A demand for errand runners is helping many Taiwanese make ends meet as they ride out the economic downturn

BY CINDY SUI
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER



Picking up dog poop and catching mosquitoes — no job is too small

BY CINDY SUI
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Ever thought about picking up dog poop or catching mosquitoes for a living? Well, now you can. Since late last year, the central government has begun offering such short-term work to jobless people in order to keep them working and the unemployment rate under control.

Around 73,000 of these jobs have been provided all over Taiwan. They range from picking up dog poop to keeping streets clean to catching mosquitoes and include helping police spot stolen vehicles, cleaning gutters, inspecting toilets, trimming lawns, and supervising garbage disposal and recycling.

The unusual program is part of a US\$15 billion public spending plan by the government to bolster the economy during the current recession, which saw the country's export-dependent economy decline by a record 10 percent in the first quarter last year.

The workers are paid NT\$800 a day and work five days a week for six months. With the unemployment rate hitting record highs, many people apply for these jobs despite the relatively low pay. Applicants include vocational school or college graduates who cannot find anything better, as well as people with mortgages to pay, kids to raise or credit card bills piling up.

Kao Shu-fang (高淑芳), a 45-year-old mother of three, has been catching mosquitoes for Kaohsiung City to prevent dengue fever outbreaks during the 2009 World Games, which will be held there next month.

"I had never heard of this kind of work before, but as I learn more about it, I find it interesting," said Kao, who used to sell baby formula at hospitals but has not been able to find work in the past two years.

The job is not as simple as it sounds — she and her colleagues must visit 100 households each day and convince people to let them in to remove standing water, get rid of mosquito larvae and catch the mosquitoes, which they send to a laboratory to test for the dengue virus.

"It takes patience and a good attitude to convince people to let you into their homes," Kao said.

The salary, while low, helps Kao and her husband make ends meet. With a mortgage and college tuition for their eldest child to pay, the couple is barely getting by.

"The situation isn't good. It's so hard to find work ... Late last year, my husband was put on unpaid leave. So in our family, money is tight," Kao said. "This job definitely helps. The NT\$800 a day I make can at least pay for food."

MANY HANDS MAKE LIGHT WORK

The government-funded program is also helping various local government offices by sending them helping hands to do the kind of work they normally do not have enough manpower to do.

"To fight dengue fever, we need a lot of people ... We need people to find these places that have standing water. Without finding them, there will be mosquito infestations, so we really need the temporary workers," said Chen Chaur-dong (陳朝東), head of the insect communicable disease prevention section of Kaohsiung City Department of Health's Center for Disease Control and Prevention (高雄市政府衛生局疾病管制處蟲媒傳染病防止股).

There are a lot of mosquitoes this year because the past winter has been warm, and the last thing the city wants is for there to be dengue fever outbreaks when thousands of athletes and spectators from all over the world descend on the city to watch the Games.

Meanwhile, the Taipei City Police Department's crime investigation division's crime prevention division (台北市政府警察局刑事警察大隊預防組), which received 20 temporary workers, is also seeing the benefits.

The workers raise public awareness about crime prevention by handing out leaflets and talking to local residents face-to-face about locking their cars, parking in well-lit public places and avoiding telephone scams. They have also helped find stolen vehicles by running license plate

numbers through handheld devices — a task police officers have little time to do.

"In the past, these tasks were done by police officers, but they're very time-consuming. Now with 20 temporary workers, our police officers can focus their time on doing more important work, such as catching criminals," said Chen Ming-chih (陳明志), chief of the section.

"By spending time educating people, the temporary workers are also helping to reduce the number of people who fall victim to crime," Chen said.

Critics, however, say these jobs are not real jobs and are not a long-term solution to Taiwan's unemployment problem. Others have wondered about workers clipping away at lawns that do not seem to need much trimming.

"The program is aimed more at beautifying the jobless figures, keeping them lower than they would be," said Son Yu-liam (孫友聯), secretary general of Taiwan Labour Front (台灣勞工陣), a workers' rights group. "People who do these jobs are desperate for work, but what they really need are long-term, stable jobs, not jobs that end in six months, which will leave them unemployed again."

A STOPGAP SOLUTION

But government officials in charge of the program argue it's better than nothing. They say many of the workers are providing useful services, including babysitting children from disadvantaged families, or helping librarians shelf books; services local governments do not have time to do and/or could not afford to hire people to do.

"Of course they're useful. Many people criticize that the jobs are cleaning, janitorial work, but they at least expose the workers to a work environment, build up their confidence and they also can earn some income to weather this period," said Sophie Ho (賀麗娟), director of the Council of Economic Planning and Development's manpower planning department (行政院經濟建設委員會人力規劃處), which helped the central government develop the program.

Keeping people busy also helps prevent domestic violence and suicides, Ho said.



The government's short-term work program helps people like Kuo Shu-fang put food on the table.

PHOTO COURTESY OF KAO SHU-FANG

Taiwan already suffers from a suicide rate above the global average. Suicides, domestic violence and child abuse are all on the rise.

"These programs can reduce problems caused by unemployment, such as suicide and crime," said Ho. In the short term, "it's at least contributing to society in some way."

The jobs have helped to keep under control Taiwan's unemployment rate, which rose to a record high of 5.81 percent in March and fell slightly to 5.76 percent in April.

However, Ho said there are no plans to create more such work.

"That's all the government can do. There's a limit. Otherwise, the grass will be cut to bareness," she said, half-jokingly.

To be sure, Taiwan's government has also created many regular jobs especially in its infrastructure construction program, but low-skilled people with no chance of finding jobs that pay a decent wage are putting their hopes on the temporary work program.

With the economy predicted to fall for three straight quarters this year and the unemployment rate in April rising only slightly since March, many workers, such as Kao, hope to be hired permanently.

Her husband, a middle manager at a publicly listed iron and steel company, has lost about half his income after being put on unpaid leave.

"Life is OK for now, but I'm afraid one day we won't have any income," Kao said.