

Being called "Overseer"

Ryoko Okada (Completed studies in 1996; Chubu Office, Kajima Corporation)

It was March in my first year of graduate studies. As I started looking for work, it was the first time I considered really what I wanted to do. Recruitment magazines were sent to my home but the economic bubble had burst and I was being told that finding employment would be difficult. The amount of recruitment information sent to me as a woman was much less than the men in my class. Despite that, after thinking everything through the work I wanted was on-site overseer. I wanted to watch the building come together before my eyes, to see it come into being.

So I started looking for work and sent cards to request materials to various general contractor companies. However, I received not a single response. Maybe they didn't want to put a woman onto their worksites. I received a letter of recommendation from the school for general contractors and finally I was hired. Maybe they thought it would be interesting to have a woman on-site, or perhaps my passion for the topic made an impression. At any rate I could move on to what I wanted to do.

When I started at the company and got to the actual worksite, I had no idea what was meant as the overseers and tradesmen talked back in forth in their jargon. Even then, though I didn't have any experience and was green as can be, the tradesmen would call me "overseer." They came to me with their questions asked me with all those words I didn't understand. At the start, we could both smile about it, but as time passed that wasn't enough. If I said "I don't understand" the tradesmen would treat me lightly. I would say, "let me check on that," run back to the office, quickly find out what they needed to know and then come back the tradesmen responding as if I knew all along what was meant.

As a new employee I often felt, "why are they making me do this job?" In the midst of that, I had the opportunity to attend a training session with a site overseer for large-scale construction in the scale of tens of billions of yen. He said, "When people are young, there are many jobs they think are a waste of time. There is no job that is a waste of time. All jobs will be for your benefit." In fact, as a young person he was sent every day to clean worksites. He wondered why he had to do this kind of work, but the experience came in useful later. This message changed the way I thought about and approached my work and remains a strong message in my heart.

Working as a site overseer is hard physically and mentally. But when the building is complete, there is a joy that eliminates the thoughts of difficulty. All of the hard labor has paid off. Without question I move on to being site overseer for the next job. Architecture is different from mass production of products in a factory. Each building, each location is built in a custom way. It has been more than ten years since I graduated that passed in the blink of an eye, but even now I am learning every day.

