

More women entering construction

by [Suzanne Hurt](#), published on November 8, 2010 at 6:40PM

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In an industry still dominated by men, Otto Construction's female employees have no problem calling the shots.

Many construction workers may not be used to women working on construction sites. Some guys are afraid they'll say or do something wrong in front of a woman. A lot of men are overly polite and even go out of their way not to swear.

Most of the time, though, the vibe isn't negative, women at the company said. Some men simply don't know what to expect. Many, especially those from small companies or subcontractors, have never worked with women on a building project.

"I think we have to overcome that question mark the way men don't," said Caralyn Hethcock, a 28-year-old project engineer. "If a male is on-site, that makes sense to them. Whereas it's still new to see a woman on-site."

In 2009, women made up about 10 percent of the construction industry workforce – a number that has held for the past several years. Women occupied about 970,200 of the country's 9,702,000 construction jobs, according to Dede Hughes, executive vice president of the National Association of Women in Construction based in Fort Worth, Texas.

The number of women in the industry has really grown in the last 10 to 15 years. While the percentage still remains small, any growth is cause for celebration. That's because construction-related jobs account for about 66 percent of all jobs in this country, Hughes said.

Those women are largely working for major companies like Otto Construction. Out in the field, the management team consists of the site superintendent, at least one project manager and at least one project engineer, who assists project managers and superintendents.

At Otto, 16 of the 107 people working there are women – or nearly 15 percent.

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That includes two out of 13 project managers; several project engineers; a project estimator; controller; a carpenter, the only female skilled tradesworker; and others working in contract administration, business development, accounting and human resources. Melissa Barrenchea, 29, is a project engineer and Natalie Ghilain, 28, is an estimator.

Today, women are majoring in construction administration, engineering and architecture in college so they can qualify for these and other high-paying construction-related jobs. It wasn't long ago that women weren't even accepted in such schools, said Lenore Janis, president of Professional Women in Construction, based in New York.

"Back in the '80s, women were not even allowed to step onto a (construction) job site," she said. "There are still places where some men don't want women on construction sites. Your major companies don't have time for this nonsense. They just want the best possible people."

Women have gotten past these barriers using other means, such as working at their fathers' companies or starting in offices. Many women still use those routes today.

That's true for all but one of the women working at Otto as project managers, project engineers, estimators or tradespeople.

Project Manager Deb Fee started working at her dad's steel company when she was 17. She worked up from receptionist to head foreman. She later became executive director of the Placer County Builders Exchange.

She worked for other contractors before being recruited to Otto five years ago. Fee, 53, managed reconstruction of Old Sacramento's Ebner Hotel/Empire House and is currently project manager for Otto's work on Township 9.

Karen Brown, another project manager, started out answering phones at a construction site in Hawaii. She worked as a project engineer for a subcontractor and then joined Otto. Brown is currently project manager on the [new California State Lottery headquarters](#).

Most women who've worked on construction sites have run into some type of discrimination, Janis said. Women may be sexually harassed by some trades people, but not those women working at the professional level, she added.

A few workers remain unfriendly the first time they work on a construction project with a woman. Fee recalled a plumber who acted continuously agitated after she asked him to move his equipment – even when he found out she was the project manager.

"When you walk on a job site, there's an instant doubt in every guy's eyes," Fee said. "It's a look of – 'Who are you? Why are you here as a woman on this job site?'"

By the second project they work on with a woman, most men have accepted them. Some men assume women, especially young ones, don't have any on-the-job experience.

"I've noticed the more wrinkles I get, the easier it is on the job," Brown said.

The women have found many ways to cope with being a minority in the workplace. Treating people with respect is one. The men often treat each other like brothers, so establishing a sisterly relationship with them is another. They'll also be the first to introduce themselves and let new workers know what their project roles are right off the bat.

Brown likes to manage with a sense of humor. She recalled the stares she got from crane operators the first time she walked onto a particular job site early in her career.

"I was young and very self-conscious. I was worried – are my pants too tight? Is my bra strap hanging out?" she said. "I was so self-conscious that I tripped

on nothing. I turned around, took off my hard hat and did a curtsy – showing them I was a human being."

Otto's upper management and project superintendents respect women employees, and that makes all the difference, Fee and the others said.

"We're still in a world of stereotypes," Fee said. "But we're fortunate Otto Construction looks beyond that. It doesn't matter if you're a man or a woman – it's what you can do."