

# Shizuoka builder taps next crop of carpenters

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KYODO

Heisei Corp., a small construction company in Shizuoka Prefecture, has a pool of 220 carpenters comprising many who finished graduate programs at the country's top schools, including the University of Tokyo.

Carpentry is by no means a magnet for new graduates on the job front in Japan due to low wages, and like any other industry in Japan it is beset by the impact of a graying population.

"The construction industry is experiencing an acute aging (of workers) and carpenters may well be called an endangered species," Hisao Akimoto, who heads Heisei, said in an interview with Kyodo News.

"I wanted to lay down arrangements and build a company to prevent such professionals from becoming extinct from this world," said the 68-year-old president of the Numazu-based company with a turnover of around ¥1.5 billion (\$131 million) in fiscal 2015.

The number of carpenters in Japan dropped to 400,000 in 2010 from roughly 1 million in the 1980s. This is projected to shrink further to 210,000 in 2020, when Japan hosts the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics, a large-scale event generating construction demand. Many carpenters are believed to be in their 50s.

Akimoto, a weight-lifting enthusiast who once aspired to be an Olympian, was a salesman with a home building firm before setting up the company in 1989 with the aim of creating a team of building professionals, including a master carpenter who traditionally undertook entire projects from design to execution.

"Carpenters used to enjoy a solid reputation," said Akimoto, whose father was a master overseeing around 30 carpenters at his shop, which eventually went bankrupt. "A master carpenter himself was engaged

in designing, building, management and training of apprentices."

But the profession has lost its appeal, he said, because construction work has become increasingly compartmentalized, and carpenters are assigned to assemble parts.

"They sometimes don't know what they are working on is used for. Besides, it is low-paying work," he said.

"One way or another, I just wanted to restore dignity to carpenters."

Heisei's projects range from wooden houses to 10-story reinforced concrete apartment buildings in the greater Tokyo area and has 575 people on its payroll, including 220 carpenters. "I took the trouble of going to numerous job offer meetings by businesses in Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya just to speak about what makes carpentry fascinating," Akimoto said.

In addition, he also decided to offer salaries to new recruits matching those of major general contractors and pay semi-annual bonuses. "Then students themselves started coming to Heisei Corp.," he said.

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HEISEI PRESIDENT HISAO AKIMOTO

One of those postgraduate carpenters is Taiyo Byakuno, 28, who joined in April 2014 after finishing a postgraduate program in architecture at Waseda University.

"I took up carpentry because I wanted to build stylish homes," the 28-year-old said at a Heisei construction site in Mishima, Shizuoka Prefecture, where a set of pillars had just been assembled on a rainy day in December.

"I wanted to feel what it was like to build something by using my own hands on a site," said Byakuno, who was among seven people working on a



Taiyo Byakuno, a carpenter at Heisei Corp., works on a construction site in Mishima, Shizuoka Prefecture. KYODO

two-story home.

Byakuno said he does not have the experience of working with nails or chisels and learned how to use them in an on-site training program.

"I recently passed an exam for first-class architect," he said of the premier certification by the Japan Federation of Architects and Building Engineers Associations. "In the future, I want to engage in comprehen-

sive home building covering design to site work."

Kosuke Naito, 28, is also a first-class architect who joined Heisei in 2012 after completing a program in architecture at the University of Tokyo's graduate school.

After a stint in carpentry for two years and nine months, he currently serves as a site supervisor. "When I was just thinking as a student about what I would do in the future, I saw a Heisei carpenter who graduated from Kyoto University on a TV program," he said.

"It grabbed my attention and I just joined the company

without thinking too much." Hanae Kawakami, 28, completed studies in architecture at the Tokyo University of the Arts' graduate school and was hired by Heisei three years ago. Certified as a first-class architect, she also did her share of carpentry work before being assigned to design work last September.

"When I was a student, design was a world made up of only lines," she said. "What is fascinating about my current work is this sense of experiencing a narrowing distance between lines on a drawing and what is actually being built."

President Akimoto is a believer in general education. "It's necessary to have a cultured mind to come up with quality buildings that incorporate customer needs," he said.

Those applying for Heisei have to take exams in general knowledge ranging from politics, economics, law and real estate. The company also conducts a test to see if applicants have the physical strength and reflexes necessary in its business operations.

These are in addition to a theoretical test, including terminology in carpentry.

Heisei is aiming to secure a pool of 1,000 highly skilled carpenters.