

CASE STUDY: Katie Kelleher, Crane Operator, Select/Laing O'Rourke

I am Katie Kelleher a crawler crane operator working for Select / Laing O'Rourke, I started my apprenticeship in October 2014 and I have been working on the Tottenham Court Road Crossrail site since May 2015.



1. What first attracted you to working in the construction industry? How did you find out about the job and what qualifications did you require?

I was working as a trades and labour recruitment consultant at the time and had previously never considered a career within the construction industry. I spent days looking at construction websites as part of my job role and had been feeling like I needed a change of career and thought - why not construction? Why couldn't I do it?

I applied for my position on the Laing O'Rourke website after browsing their career section and although I really didn't expect to hear anything due to my lack of site experience, I shortly had a call inviting me to come and interview for a position as an apprentice lifting technician. Select put me through my apprenticeship and I received the following tickets - Tower Crane, Crawler crane, Mobile Crane, slinger/signaler, traffic Marshall, Ped op Tower Crane. I then went on to complete my NVQ and receive my competent operator card as a crawler crane and mobile operator.

2. Have you encountered any obstacles in your career because of your gender?

I haven't come across it myself but I have heard stories. I think I have been exceptionally lucky; I was fully supported by my company throughout my training but I pushed myself hard to be good at what I do. Once I was trained and sent to site I was lucky enough to work on a Crossrail site where we have a lot of female engineers on site and Crossrail themselves are so supportive.

It was a very daunting experience starting on site and I think in general the guys on site are not used to seeing us in a plant operating capacity or a trades capacity so people do stare and ask a lot of questions about you. Even now we have different contractors starting on site and they always ask my banksman what is the lady crane operator like and is she any good?

I never wanted people to judge my operating on my sex so I always pushed myself super hard to be the best I could be. I wanted to be on par if not a better operator than the others, and was probably slightly hard on myself to be honest.

3. Tell us about your current role. What does a typical day look like? What do you like and dislike about the job?

I arrive at 7am for the daily briefing which tells me what is happening on site that day.

My first job is to give the crane a once over to check it is working order – making sure it is safe is the most important part of the day.

I then get down to lifting materials across the site. Many of the lifts, such as unloading deliveries on the surface and lowering them down to platform level 40m below ground, are done 'blind' so I rely on the crane teams to guide me.

I get two half hour breaks a day and my hours are 7-6 but I often work on later. I think the hardest part of my job is the long days, often I will work Saturdays too.

4. What qualities are required to do your job?

I believe you need to be hard working, you need to have good concentration and you need to listen as you are completely reliant on what your banksman is telling you. You also need to be flexible as you may need to work longer hours or travel to a site that is far away from home.

5. What are your future career aspirations?

I really don't know, it's been such a journey so far I'm so excited to see where it will lead next.

I have been lucky enough to win awards, go to Parliament, be interviewed on TV, radio, magazine and newspaper, talk at schools and I have also been appointed as a member of STAT (the Strategic Transport Apprenticeship Taskforce) led by commissioner of transport Mike Brown, as well as being a crane operator.

It's great that I can put myself out there in the hope to inspire more people to get into the industry, to talk about my journey and my achievements in the hope that others may get involved. I'm not sure where I will go next but I'll keep pushing forward, keep telling people you can do this, keep pushing apprenticeships for all, keep operating cranes and see where I end up.

6. Is construction a welcoming environment for women? In particular, is it a welcoming atmosphere on site?

It is a daunting atmosphere especially in roles where people are not used to seeing women. When I first started on site I often questioned myself as to what I was doing there, it was hard and challenging until I settled in. People do look a lot and whilst not nasty can be intimidating. Now I have been there over two years I think it's a brilliant place to work and people are very friendly, probably slightly more friendly to me because I am a woman.

7. In the time you have worked in construction, do you think the industry has improved its attitude towards women?

I don't think I have been in the industry long enough to comment, plus since I finished training in the Select yard I have been based on the same site.

8. Why do you think women remain underrepresented in the industry?

I don't think there are enough female construction role models putting themselves out there. I know things are better at some schools now but when I was in school nobody ever mentioned to me the possibility of working within construction. I think we need to make school leavers and college leavers aware of construction opportunities and apprenticeship opportunities.

I think until this happens we won't see a change in the number of females within the industry. The perception of what working on site involves needs to change. I think a lot of people still have a stereotypical builder type when they picture the people who work within construction.

9. Would you recommend that young women seek out careers in construction? What advice would you give them?

It's important that young ladies realise that any industry and any position is open to them. I wouldn't tell them all to go and be crane operators but I would tell them the construction industry as a whole is rife with opportunity and it is genuinely a great industry to work in. Have a look at all the different positions out there - decide if you want an apprenticeship, to go to university or to pay for your own tickets

The only thing holding you back is you! Don't let the stereotype of working on site put you off. Look at doing some of the Open Doors events, and a lot of companies offer construction visits/tasters/talks, and speak to people who work on site.

Let's keep pushing forward and show everyone exactly what strong, powerful women can do and be.

10. How does a diverse workforce benefit the industry as a whole?

I think the more diverse the workforce the better balance on site; I honestly believe it allows a happier working atmosphere.

11. What should the industry and wider society be doing to encourage more women to work in construction?

I think the more construction female role models we can get out there on posters, magazines, TV, and school talks the better. I did a school talk at a girls' school about what I do, I think things like this are great and the girls were genuinely interested in what the construction industry can offer.