

## Article

# What Hurdles Are Young Female Regular Employees Facing in Japan? Recent Changes in the Young Generation's Career Attitudes

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## I. Introduction

On April 1, the beginning of the fiscal year, university students and other people who will graduate in the spring of next year officially begin job hunting. In recent years, the young labor market has been a seller's market beyond the level seen during the bubble economy. Under such circumstances, young people's attitudes toward their careers have been changing. This article presents some of the findings that capture the changes in young people's experience in their first job<sup>1</sup> as the starting point of their career, from the results of Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (JILPT)'s "3rd Survey on Skills Development of Young People and Their Retention in the Workplace" conducted in November 2023 (hereinafter, the "3rd Survey").<sup>2</sup>

Job hunting depends on the business climate at the time. Particularly, the employment of Japanese young people tends to be influenced by the business conditions and prospects as many of them are hired under the employment practice called "simultaneous recruitment of new graduates" (*shinsotsu ikkatsu saiyo*) that has been in operation for more than 100 years through cooperation between companies and schools for mass recruitment of new students immediately after graduation, on the condition that they will be employed without a fixed-term. Schools and companies work together to help new school graduates find employment in Japan. As students undergo recruitment screening while they are in their final year of school, schools provide them with career counseling and job hunting support, while companies hold recruiting sessions targeted at their schools;

Young people who are hired without work experience are expected to develop their capabilities through on-the-job training (OJT) and other in-house training, or job rotation. Due to this system, transition from school to work under regular employment is relatively easy in a booming economy. On the other hand, during a time of economic recession, the transition becomes unstable as the recruitment of new graduates is curtailed. This increases the number of young people who are unable to find jobs or workplaces of their choice as well as that of early job resignation. With this structural background, the employment issues of young people have been discussed mainly in terms of failure to make a transition to stable jobs and maladjustment to work since the 1990s when the economy rapidly cooled and remained stagnant.

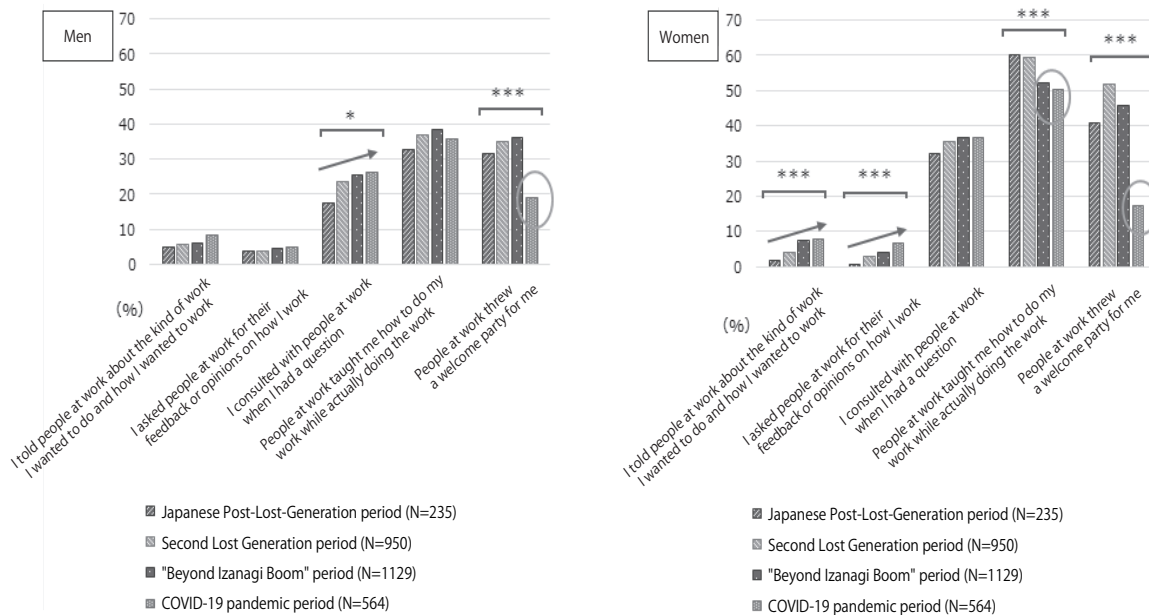
However, it is necessary to reevaluate the employment issues of young people from a different viewpoint as it has become easier, particularly in recent years, for young people to find jobs as regular employees when they graduate schools or change jobs due to the economic boom and the rapid decline in the youth population. For example, under favorable economic conditions, it would be easier for young people to find jobs or workplaces of their choice, and therefore fewer of them would quit their jobs in early stages. In reality, despite the long-term demand increase in the labor market, the early job resignation rate among university graduates has not declined since around 2010 (according to Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare's annual survey "Status of Job Resignation of New Graduates" on the job turnover rate of new graduates within three years of employment). This suggests that young workers'

behavior in leaving jobs has been changing in nature (Furuya 2024). The “5th Survey on the Working Style of Young People” conducted by JILPT in 2021 (JILPT 2022) also shows that regular employees who continue to work for the same company are less likely to find their work rewarding than those who have changed jobs (JILPT 2022). Such clear change in young people’s career attitudes indicates the necessity to reconsider the relationship between young people and work.

What would be the relationship between young people’s career attitudes and the jobs they actually do in the future? Sections II to IV below discuss the signs of changes in attitudes among young regular employees, particularly female regular employees, and the current state of their workplace environment, which may not always be well accommodated to these changing attitudes.

## II. Growing desire for career development and declining engagement in workplace

The results of the 3rd Survey indicated a tendency that younger generations are more motivated to develop their career proactively. At the same time, it was revealed that recent generations, or particularly people who graduated during the COVID-19 pandemic, lack experience of being accepted as co-workers or opportunities for on-the-job training (OJT). These trends are particularly obvious among young female regular employees. Figure 1 shows the percentage of respondents who answered “yes” to each of the options about communication in the workplace during the first three months after starting their first job, by time of graduation, among young men and women who were hired as regular employees upon graduation<sup>3</sup> (hereinafter, the “regular employees



Source: “3rd Survey on Skills Development of Young People and Their Retention in the Workplace” (conducted in November 2023) (JILPT 2025).

Notes: 1. The respondents were asked to respond to all options that apply regarding what happened to them during the three months after they started to work at their “first workplace” after graduation.

2. From around 1993 to 2004, Japan experienced a sharp decline in economic growth and the job opening-to-applicant ratio. The period is often referred to as the “employment ice age,” and the generation with new graduates who entered the labor market during that period is known as the “Japanese lost generation.”

Figure 1. Communication in the workplace during the first three months after starting their first jobs (regular employees hired upon graduation), by time of graduation (Multi Answer)

hired upon graduation”).

The responses to this question show that among female regular employees, the percentage of those who approached their company or the leader at their workplace by “telling them what kind of work they wanted to do and how they wanted to work” or “asking for feedback or opinions on how they work” is significantly higher for younger generations in statistical terms, although the values are small. Among male regular employees, the percentage of those who consulted with people at work when they had a question is higher for younger generations. This is a sign of change in that younger generations are seeking proactive career development and feedback from the workplace.<sup>4</sup> There is a possibility that young people in the future will move away from workplaces where they are only given one-sided instructions. In particular, the changes observed among female regular employees are worth noting. While the percentage of women who started their first job as regular employees and continue in their first job has been on the rise (JILPT 2021; 2024), it is necessary to pay attention to changes in the career attitudes among women who continue to work as regular employees and their needs for the workplace.

Some results of the 3rd Survey are in contrast with the tendency of young people becoming more proactive in the workplace as described above. Focusing on the responses regarding the engagement in the workplace, such as “People at work taught me how to do my work while actually doing the work” (OJT opportunities) and “People at work threw a welcome party for me,” the percentage is lower for younger generations among female regular employees who chose the option regarding OJT opportunities and among both male and female regular employees who chose the option regarding a welcome party. It seems that the generations newly hired, during the COVID-19 pandemic in particular, lacked opportunities to learn how to do their work while being taught face-to-face immediately after joining the workplace or opportunities to feel that they were accepted as co-workers in the workplace, due to the impact of the companies’ voluntary ban on commuting and face-to-face activities. The 2nd

Survey conducted in 2018 indicated that holding a welcome party for newly hired young employees would significantly contribute to their retention. Accordingly, such a decline in employee engagement in the workplace may have not a small influence on the job resignation among young regular employees in the future.

### **III. What has and has not changed in job resignation among young employees? Difference in resignation reasons by gender**

Changes in young people’s career attitudes are also reflected in changes in the reasons for leaving their jobs. Table 1 indicates, by gender, the options that were frequently chosen out of the 17 options regarding the reasons why regular employees hired upon graduation<sup>5</sup> left their first job.

Reasons for leaving a job can be roughly divided into positive and negative factors. The top five reasons commonly cited by men and women are negative factors related to working conditions or the workplace environment, including: “Because the terms and conditions for work hours, days off, and leave were not good”, “Because the wage conditions were not good”; “Because my physical or mental health suffered”; and “Because personal relationships were not good.” This trend is common to all three surveys conducted so far (JILPT 2017; 2019), showing that the development and improvement of working conditions and the workplace environment remain the most important issues for retaining young people in the workplace. However, as shown below, different trends are observed between men and women.

The most common reason for leaving a job cited by male regular employees was “To advance my career,” which is a positive factor. Although an exact comparison cannot be made due to differences in the sampling and response tendency between the 3rd Survey and the previous surveys, this reason, “To advance my career,” was the third common reason cited by male regular employees in the 2nd Survey in 2018. This suggests a trend of an increase in positive job resignation among male regular employees for

Table 1. Changes in the reasons why regular employees hired upon graduation left their first job (MA, top five out of 17 options)

	Men total		Women total
To advance my career	(1st, 27.3%)	Because my physical or mental health suffered	(1st, 31.8%)
Because personal relationships were not good	(2nd, 25.3%)	Because personal relationships were not good	(2nd, 31.2%)
Because the wage conditions were not good	(3rd, 22.4%)	Because the terms and conditions for working hours, days off, and leave were not good	(3rd, 27.0%)
Because the terms and conditions for working hours, days off, and leave were not good	(4th, 22.2%)	Because I couldn't do my job well and lost confidence	(4th, 20.9%)
Because my physical or mental health suffered	(5th, 21.8%)	Because the wage conditions were not good	(5th, 19.3%)
—		—	
Because I couldn't do my job well and lost confidence	(8th, 17.5%)	Due to marriage or childbirth	(8th, 16.7%)
—		—	
Source: Same as Figure 1.		To advance my career	(10th, 14.4%)

the purpose of career development.

In contrast, the fourth most common reason for leaving a job cited by female regular employees was a negative factor, “Because I couldn’t do my job well and lost confidence,” which ranked higher than the eighth place among male regular employees. In addition, leaving a job “to advance my career” ranked only 10th for women, about 13 percentage points lower than for men. In other words, female regular employees are still more inclined to leave their jobs for negative reasons than male regular employees. However, there has been a change in the reasons for female regular employees leaving their jobs: “Due to marriage or childbirth,” which was the top reason for female regular employees leaving their jobs in the 2nd Survey in 2018, is only in the eighth place in the 3rd survey. This indicates that more young female regular employees remain employed after marriage and childbirth without leaving their jobs.

#### IV. Hurdles to long-term employment of female regular employees: changing attitudes and workplace environment unable to catch up with the change

As reviewed above, in recent years, young female

regular employees have become more willing to proactively develop their careers, and they are increasingly apt to continue working after marriage and childbirth. At the same time, however, it is suggested that the hurdles to career development are still higher for them than for male regular employees. The section below examines the background to this trend in further detail. The first point to identify is the differences in the reasons for job resignation among regular employees hired upon graduation, according to their length of service. For the classification of length of service, the categories shown in Table 2 are used.

Figure 2 shows the reasons for job resignation among regular employees hired upon graduation, by gender and length of service. Among male regular employees, positive reasons such as “To advance my career” and “Because I don’t see any future for the company” were relatively common overall, and the percentage for these positive reasons increased significantly as the length of service increased. On the other hand, negative factors, such as “Because personal relationships were not good” and “Because my physical or mental health suffered,” were typical among female regular employees. The percentage of women leaving their jobs due to marriage, childbirth,

or childcare also remains significantly higher than that of men, although it has been decreasing over time.

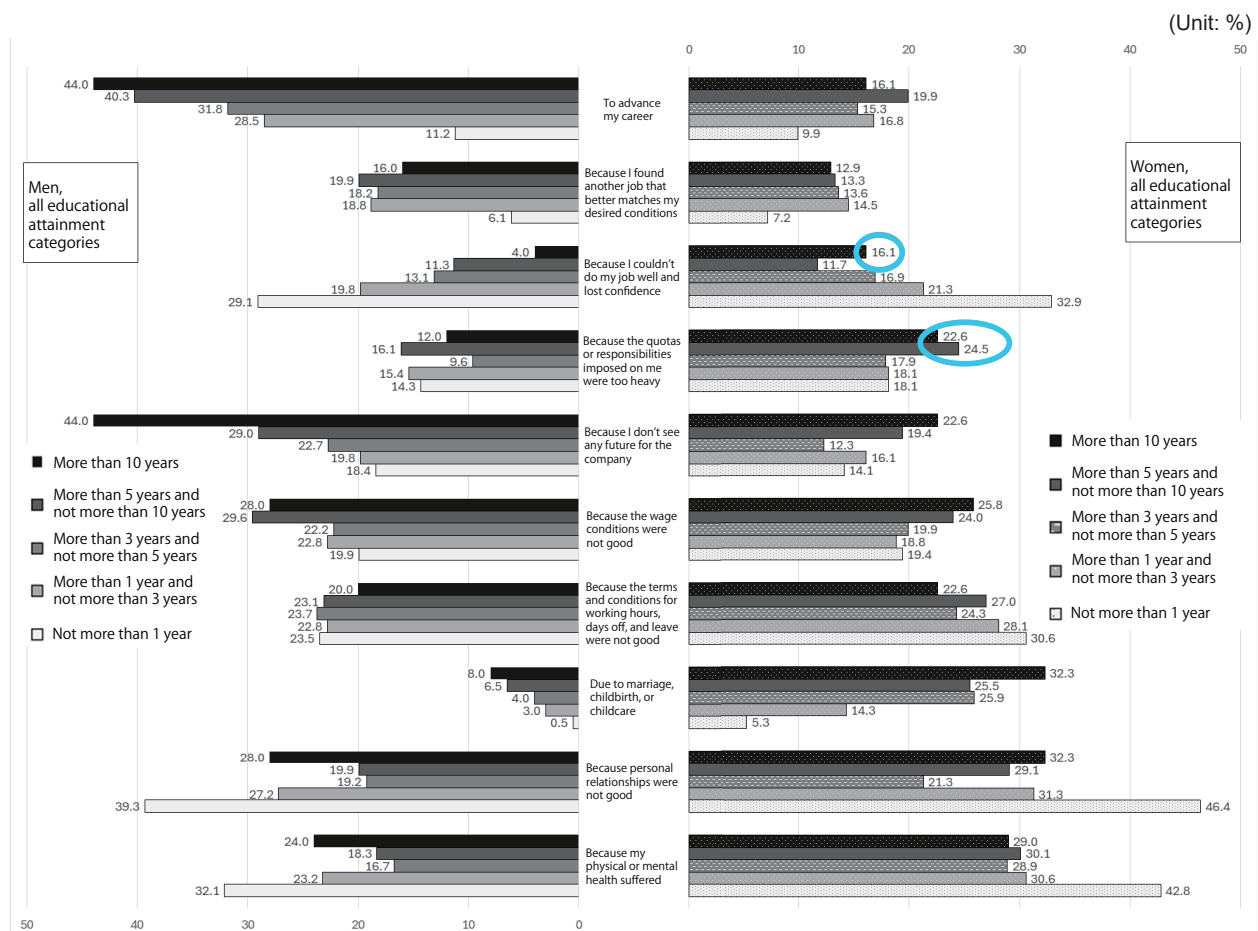
It is worth noting, however, that there are signs of

positive career-oriented job resignation among female regular employees in the 3rd Survey. For example, let us focus on women who chose the job resignation reasons of “To advance my career” or

Table 2. Length of service of regular employees hired upon graduation

	Men		Women	
	%	N	%	N
Not more than 1 year	11.3	316	16.4	449
More than 1 year and not more than 3 years	18.6	520	26.4	721
More than 3 years and not more than 5 years	18.0	504	21.2	579
More than 5 years and not more than 10 years	30.8	863	25.0	683
More than 10 years	21.3	597	11.0	300
Total	100.0	2,800	100.0	2,732

Source: Same as Figure 1.



Source: Same as Figure 1.

Figure 2. Reasons for job resignation among regular employees hired upon graduation, by length of service (extract, MA)



“Because I found another job that better matches my desired conditions.” Those who had worked for the same company for more than one year left their jobs in search of more favorable conditions. Similarly, looking at those who chose “Because I don’t see any future for the company” or “Because the wage conditions were not good,” those with more than five years of service left their jobs in search of a better workplace and better treatment. This tendency was not seen in the 2nd Survey in 2018. It was only observed for men in the 1st and 2nd Surveys. These trends suggest that the choice of experienced young people to leave their jobs in search of a better workplace is spreading in recent years among female regular employees as well.

In general, it is considered that as a worker’s length of service increases, the worker becomes more proficient at their job and more confident. In fact, such a trend was observed among male regular employees in the 3rd survey. However, it was found that not a few female regular employees lose confidence in their work and left their jobs after 10 years of service. The percentage of female regular employees with more than 10 years of service who left their jobs because they “couldn’t do their job well and lost confidence” reached 16.1%, approximately 12 percentage points higher than the 4.0% of male regular employees with more than 10 years of service. In addition, among female regular employees who have been with the same company for more than five years and not more than 10 years; and those who have been with the same company for more than 10 years, the percentage of those who left the company “because the quotas or responsibilities imposed on them were too heavy” is about 8 to 10 percentage points higher than among male regular employees with the same length of service (the numbers marked with circles in the Figure 2).

This trend appears to align with another pattern observed among female regular employees: an increasing job turnover “Due to marriage, childbirth, or childcare” with increasing years of service. It suggests that the time work quotas and responsibilities become heavier coincides with the time when family responsibilities increase, and that balancing work

and family responsibilities can be a major burden for female regular employees, to the extent that they are forced to leave their jobs. While female regular employees are becoming more motivated to develop their career and more conscious about career advancement, the workplace environment that allows them to fulfill their aspiration has not yet been developed.

In analyzing the data, it is necessary to take into account the fact that the availability of the opportunity to join a workplace with an environment suitable for continued working differs between men and women. Even with the same educational attainment, there are differences between men and women in the size of the company, the industry, and the occupation in which new graduates find employment. Most female new graduates find employment in medium and small-sized companies, retail or service industries, and clerical, sales (*eigyō / hanbai*), or service jobs. Compared to men, they are relatively less likely to find employment at large companies that offer a good work-life balance. In addition, the heavy work quotas are also specific to sales and service jobs, for which women are more likely to be employed (JILPT 2025). In other words, it must be understood that women, in the first place, are prone to find jobs in inadequate workplaces where job resignation could easily occur. Furthermore, it should be noted that there is a difference between regions. While large companies and knowledge-intensive industries that produce high added value are concentrated in metropolitan areas, good employment opportunities are limited in rural areas. Thus, not only do women tend to find jobs in industries with poor quality of employment, but they have poor job opportunities with favorable labor conditions in industries of their choice unless they move to metropolitan areas. They face double difficulties.

Now, having referred to job resignation due to increased work quotas and responsibilities in Figure 2, let us further examine the relationship between the length of service and the changes in workload. Figure 3 shows how young people who are first hired as regular employees after school graduation experience changes in the job content along with years of service,



\*\*\*p<.001 \*\*p<.01 \*p<.05

Source: Same as Figure 1.

Figure 3. Change in work along with years of service among people who were hired as regular employees for their first job (MA)

broken down by gender.

Figure 3 shows an overall tendency that the volume, difficulty, and responsibilities of work assigned all increase with increasing years of service, for both men and women. However, it can be read that female regular employees feel burdened by workload and responsibilities from an earlier stage. The figure also shows that the percentage of female regular employees who were “assigned to work with heavier responsibilities” slightly decreased after 10 years of service.<sup>6</sup> Although further analysis of the detailed mechanism is needed, it is considered to be due to the burden of heavier work responsibilities with increasing years of service, and family responsibilities at the same time. Although the figures are omitted here, the developmental nature of work—such as increasing volume and growing difficulty of work—tends to contribute to the retention of young regular employees in the workplace. Regarding the increased responsibilities, on the contrary, tends to lead to job resignation especially among female regular employees. Taking into account the finding mentioned above that the percentage of female respondents who answered that their work

responsibilities became heavier decreases after more than 10 years of service, it can be inferred that the number of women leaving their jobs after five years of service increases as they find it difficult to balance family and work responsibilities, and that there is a group of women who continue their career without leaving their jobs through such difficulties, which forms the group of “more than 10 years of service” in the survey.

In Japan, it is difficult for female regular employees to remain in the same company for a long period of time. This situation is reflected in the distribution of the length of service among regular employees hired upon graduation, as shown in Table 2. The length of service at the same company is, as a whole, longer among male regular employees and shorter among female regular employees. Furthermore, when focusing on the group of those who have been with the same company for more than 10 years, 21.3% of male employees fall within this group, while the percentage of female employees falling within this group is only about half of that, at 11.0%.

As reviewed so far, factors such as workload and

the burden of balancing work and family responsibilities are making it difficult for young female regular employees to stay with the same company for a long time despite the fact that they are becoming increasingly willing to continue their careers. One possible reason for this is that the workplace environment itself may contain conditions that are not as conducive to women. Table 3 compares the responses of men and women, by educational attainment, regarding the corporate culture of the company that they joined as regular employees for their first job and the workplace troubles they faced there.

According to the Table 3, there is no gender difference in the percentage of respondents who answered, “There is an atmosphere of the company as a whole taking a positive attitude about developing its employees,” with female regular employees having the same perception as male regular employees. On the other hand, however, the percentage of those who answered “There was a situation where due to a labor shortage, the company would not be able to continue its operations even if one worker missed work” was higher among female regular employees in all categories of educational attainment. Female regular employees were also more likely than male regular employees to feel that “Many employees leave the company one after another in a short period of time,” with the exception of those in the category of graduates of professional training colleges/junior colleges/colleges of technology (*kosen*).

These results indicate that even if there is no gender difference in the company’s positive attitude toward developing its employees, female regular employees more keenly feel a sense of labor shortage and difficulty in working. It can be inferred that even companies with a positive attitude toward human resource development do not have in place sufficient environmental arrangements, such as work allocation and staffing, at the workplaces where female regular employees engage in work.

## **V. Toward a society where the seeds of change take root: what should be done to support the proactive career development and continued service of female regular employees?**

As reviewed thus far, there is a growing willingness among young regular employees of the new generation in Japan to proactively build their careers. In recent years, signs of this trend can be seen not only among men, who maintain a superior status in the job market, but also among women. The percentage of female regular employees who leave their jobs after marriage or childbirth is also on a downward trend. More young women are becoming more conscious of the way they want to live their lives and their potential in career development, and are continuing to work as regular employees. This is a significant sign of change.

The result of the 3rd Survey indicates the situation that women have difficulty finding workplaces that offer good working conditions and work-life balance in the first place (JILPT 2025) and shows that the workplace environment has not caught up with the recent changes in their attitudes toward work. As a result, there are still many women who leave their jobs due to being deprived of the chance to develop their career while engaging in work. As the situation has improved in about 40 years since the enactment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, the society is gradually changing with more men taking paternity leave than before, for instance. However, there are still issues to be addressed in Japan. In order to support the career development of young women and their desire to continue working, it is necessary to create an environment where both men and women can naturally choose flexible work styles toward the fundamental reform of the structure that still persists and imposes the intensive demand of balancing family and work responsibilities on women.

This is a translation of the author’s article, Oguro 2025, with additional updated analysis for *Japan Labor Issues*.

### **Notes**

1. In this article, the first job a person takes after graduation is



defined as their “first job.”

2. This 3rd Survey is an online survey conducted for men and women aged 20 to 34 nationwide, following the 1st Survey (conducted in 2016) and the 2nd Survey (conducted in 2018), with the aim of exploring the workplace and societal conditions that enable young people to build stable and fulfilling careers. The respondents comprised 7,994 individuals with last educational background of graduates from high schools, professional training colleges (*senmon gakko*), junior colleges, colleges of technology (*kosen*), universities, or master’s programs of graduate schools, who are not enrolled in any educational institution at the time of the survey. For an overview of the 3rd Survey, collected data, and questionnaire, refer to JILPT (2025).
3. In this article, “regular employees hired upon graduation” refer to individuals who were hired by the end of the month following the month of their graduation. The analysis targets these employees in order to examine the effects of the time of graduation.
4. It is necessary to consider that the younger generation is more likely to have attained higher levels of education due to the rising university enrollment rate. When examined by educational attainment, the same trend was observed not only for women with university or graduate school degrees, but also for women with high school diplomas.
5. Table 1 includes a comparison with the 2nd Survey (although not in a strict sense). In order to ensure consistency with the attributes of the subjects in the 2nd Survey, the data was collected for regular employees hired upon graduation. For the same reason, Table 2 and Figure 2 also use data for regular employees hired upon graduation.
6. This trend is even more pronounced in large companies with 300 or more employees, where the scope of changes in work is broader. For the sake of simplicity, the analysis here is conducted without stratifying the data by company size, however, the JILPT 2025 analyzes the data by company size.

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