

TAKING FLIGHT

Airline workers land ergonomic improvements at Pearson Airport

Few industries in recent years have undergone such massive and public reorganization as the Canadian airline industry. For those in its employ it's been a time of uncertainty and significant change including a massive \$4 billion redevelopment project at Canada's busiest airport.

Despite the upheaval some workers at Toronto's Pearson International Airport have nonetheless secured ergonomic improvements and helped reduce suffering and injury among their members.

As passengers, once our bags are checked and our boarding pass is in hand, it's time to sit back and relax. For airline workers though, the job has just begun. From check-in, as many as eight or nine workers will tag, sort, handle and load each piece of baggage.

Take for instance Air Canada baggage allowance limits which generally permit two checked bags per passenger, each of which can weigh up to 32 kg or about 70 lbs. From this, conservative estimates would suggest airport baggage personnel physically handle several tonnes of luggage every shift.

Working 20 years at Pearson Rob Penyk has seen far too many co-workers crippled with serious work-related injuries. He's the fulltime worker co-chair of the Air Canada aircraft services joint health and safety committee (JHSC) at Pearson and a member of the Airline Central Lodge 2323 International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAMAW). Penyk was a member of the committee more than 10 years ago when he says, "We decided to blitz one area and get some achievable results to help reduce our members' suffering. We needed a win."

He's never looked back. With their work cut out for them, worker members of the committee set out to make the business case for ergonomic interventions. From lost time injury data it was clear the greatest incidence of injury was among baggage handling crews. The committee further calculated the average cost per injury convincing their management counterparts ergonomic interventions were long overdue. The JHSC co-chairs contacted the Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers (OHCOW) in Toronto for assistance in identifying risk factors and potential redesign solutions.

Working hand in hand with the union and employer, OHCOW conducted a health survey of workers and an ergonomic analysis. They identified high rates of injuries and poorly designed work areas in the domestic bag room in the Terminal 2 building. In particular, its double pier baggage loading areas exposed workers to significant risk of back, neck, shoulder and knee injury.

OHCOW recommended moving from a double to a single pier system. Air Canada eventually agreed to a prototype redesign despite concerns a single pier would reduce productivity. They agreed to redesign their busiest baggage pier. "We started with the worst case scenario," explains Penyk. "Our senior members avoided working there because it was so physically punishing." A follow up survey indicated reduced rates of injury and pain. Workers also found the redesigned area easier to work from. But Penyk was certain they had succeeded when senior workers requested to work in that area again. Productivity even slightly increased. Says Penyk, "In the end, the cost of not changing the work area far outweighed the cost of the intervention."

This success helped secure future interventions when Air Canada merged with Canadian Airlines necessitating a move into the old Terminal 1. At its massive carousel conveyors workers had to awkwardly bend and stoop to gather baggage. OHCOW's ergonomic analyses confirmed lifting more than 25 lbs at the workstation put workers at serious risk of harm. Air Canada committed to retrofitting and raising the carousels to 32.5 inches. They also adopted the model as a corporate standard and made similar modifications at their airport operations in Vancouver and Montreal.

In the midst of all these changes came an even greater one, the creation of the Greater Toronto Airports Authority (GTAA). In 1996 it assumed responsibility for the management, operation and maintenance of Pearson International Airport. Employers, such as Air Canada, became GTAA tenants. This meant fostering a new relationship to address ongoing health and safety concerns.

For instance, during the design stage of the new Terminal 1 building both Air Canada and the GTAA agreed to incorporate the revised Air Canada carousel design standard. However, when Penyk became aware engineering drawings for the bag rooms included the former troublesome double pier design, the JHSC pressed for and succeeded in having the ergonomic single pier system installed instead.

The JHSC worked with OHCOW again in 2003 to resolve another problem area. Curbs were removed from inbound baggage staging areas. The change now allows baggage handlers easier access when loading racetrack carousels.

Checking in

Airline personnel who deal more directly with the public have their own list of concerns. Sylvia Rothlin-Vink recalls a time when passenger check-in tasks were manual, there were no printers, notes were handwritten and no one knew about ergonomics. The full-time health and safety chairperson for Air Canada passenger service personnel at Pearson, members of Canadian Auto Workers Local 2002, says in her 25 years at the airport gains have come but not without the inevitable growing pains.

Prior to Air Canada's move into the new Terminal 1 building in April 2004, the GTAA sought initial labour and management input into workstation designs, but looming deadlines and tight budgets meant check-in counters were installed with existing flaws. Agents continued to report neck, shoulder and back pain. Repeatedly each shift they would awkwardly reach down to boarding pass printers then extend forward to activate baggage conveyors and to handle passengers' flight documents.

Rothlin-Vink knew they'd also have to make the business case to the employer and the GTAA for a workstation redesign. Systematically she gathered lost time injury statistics and documented workers' concerns. Last fall the JHSC agreed to bring in Toronto OHCOW staff to assess the new check-in counters. Rothlin-Vink's own approach to ergonomics is straightforward. "I draw a parallel to setting up a house. After you build the house you add furniture. You place your couch in relation to where your tables are so you don't have to reach or get up. That makes sense."

The report, completed by Toronto OHCOW ergonomist Syed Naqvi last November, helped win the day says Rothlin-Vink. "We did our homework to capture the incidence of injuries but OHCOW's report solidified our case." From the report two check-in counters have been modified by raising the boarding pass printers and removing a cumbersome sleeve from the bag release button. The JHSC is gathering workers' feedback on the modified workstations before proceeding with these and other interventions.

While Rothlin-Vink and Penyk hold out hope for ergonomic regulations they're not waiting to act. Securing ergonomic environments is a work in progress they say. From experience Penyk says, "You have to do your

homework, build a strategy, educate yourself and your members and use the many existing resources out there. We have great tools but they are worthless unless we commit them to action.”

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Sylvia Rothlin-Vink (left), CAW Local 2002 full-time chairperson for Air Canada passenger service personnel at Pearson Airport, gathers feedback from members working on modified check-in counters.



Rob Penyk, Airline Central Lodge 2323 IAMAW and co-chair of Air Canada’s aircraft services health and safety committee has worked for a decade with the employer and OHCOW to implement ergonomic improvements to baggage handling areas at Pearson Airport.