

Case Study

Vancouver International Airport Authority

British Columbia

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Introduction

This case study is one of a series of twelve such studies conducted by the Canadian Labour and Business Centre during 2001 – 2002.

Issues of workplace health and wellness are an ongoing priority for the Centre, which is a joint organization founded on strong membership from the main workplace parties – business and labour. We believe that approaches which promote workplace health and wellness are in the best interests of both employers and workers – a clear ‘win-win’. In particular, in a period of anticipated growing skill shortages, those employers who pay attention to workplace health issues will have a competitive advantage over others in recruiting and retaining workers with much-needed skills.

The following case study reflects the Centre’s main objective in undertaking this work, namely:

- To identify the key features of the wellness initiatives in each workplace;
- To document the role of both management and unions/workers in managing these initiatives;
- To assess the relationship between the initiatives and the organization’s business strategy and ‘culture’; and
- To document the ways in which the workplace monitors the impacts of its health/wellness activities.

In short, the case studies are as much about the *process* of workplace wellness as about the *content* and *impacts* of individual workplaces’ initiatives.

Taken as a group, the full set of cases has been deliberately assembled to reflect, as widely as possible, a broad diversity of workplaces in terms of geography, sector, size, and union/non-union status. As a group, the cases are intended to tap the experience and practice of a variety of workplaces, in order to maximize the benefit from the case study work. Readers will note, as a result, that no two cases are alike, and that the lessons to be learned from each case vary considerably.

The full set of case studies will be available on the Centre’s website at www.clbc.ca, where they will be published individually. The Centre is also preparing a summary commentary on the cases, which will identify key common features – and important differences – among them. Finally, the Centre is developing a series of regional seminars at which some of the workplaces featured in these case studies will share their experiences. As they are scheduled, the seminars will also be listed on the CLBC website.

The Canadian Labour and Business Centre welcomes readers’ comments and questions, which may be communicated to the Centre at (613) 234-0505, or to info@clbc.ca

Vancouver Airport Case Study Summary

- *Vancouver International Airport is Canada's second busiest airport and a major West Coast gateway. In 2000, YVR serviced some 16 million passengers and registered 295,000 take-offs and landings.*
- *Safety and employee well-being are critical components of the Airport's business strategy, with strong perceived linkages to passenger satisfaction.*
- *The Airport offers an incentive-based wellness program that encourages employees to develop healthy lifestyles. The program takes a balanced and holistic approach to health promotion, recognizing the physical, psychological and social aspects of wellness.*
- *Planning and co-ordination of the wellness program activities is carried out by a wellness committee, composed of labour and management.*
- *High levels of participation and early signs of successful outcomes are apparent to both management and employees.*

I. Background

Vancouver International Airport (YVR) is an independent, non-governmental not-for-profit corporation. The airport is operated and managed by the Vancouver International Airport Authority, which assumed the management and operations of YVR from Transport Canada in 1992. The Airport Authority is governed by a Board of Directors, which oversees the business conduct of the Authority and the activities of management. The Board's fundamental objective is to ensure that the Authority fulfils its objectives on an on-going basis and operates in a safe, efficient, and reliable manner.

The airport is located on federally owned land on Sea Island in the city of Richmond, British Columbia. Vancouver International Airport accommodates all classes of aircraft, and serves both international and domestic carriers. Vancouver Airport has grown enormously from the time of its first scheduled passenger flights in 1932. Today, it is Canada's second busiest airport and a major West Coast gateway. In 2000, YVR serviced some 16 million passengers and registered 295,000 take-offs and landings.

The Airport Authority currently employs approximately 330 employees, working in three main divisions: the terminal building, groundside operations (access to the terminal) and airside operations. Employees are unionized (PSAC, Local 20221), and almost all (about 98%) are full-time employees. The Authority's workforce is relatively young, averaging around 35-45 years of age. About 40 per cent of employees are female.

The Airport is a major economic generator in the province, far beyond that suggested by its employment numbers, as roughly 26,000 people are employed in approximately 400

businesses in and around the airport (airlines, rental car companies, concessions, restaurants, etc.).

The Airport Authority's formal mission statement is *to serve our community by building outstanding airports for the 21st century*.¹ To achieve this mission, the Airport Authority aims for excellence in the areas of safety, security and the environment.

In recent years, the Airport Authority has been the recipient of several awards and distinctions:

- In 2000, YVR was ranked as the best airport in North America and fourth in the world for overall passenger satisfaction through the International Air Transport Association survey.
- Airports Council International ranked YVR #1 for retail among large airports.
- In 1999, YVR was voted Best Organization (50 to 500 employees) for providing a safe workplace by the Canadian Society of Safety Engineering; and in 2000 received Honourable Mention.
- An Award of Distinction for leadership practices from the Quality Council of BC in 1999.
- British Columbia Safety Council's "Challenge 2000: Best New Entry" award for North American Occupational Safety and Health Week activities.

II. Impetus for Healthy Workplace Initiatives

Links to the Organization's Goals and Business Strategy

To understand the motivation behind YVR's recent health and safety initiatives, it is important to situate employee safety and well-being within the corporation's strategic objectives, of which there are eight²:

1. Keep safety, security and environmental excellence as our first priority
2. Maintain a strong, flexible and capable team of professionals
3. Become the best airport in the process
4. Enhance revenues and provide value for money
5. Build the Pacific Gateway of choice
6. Become the best in customer service
7. Continue to excel in open relationships with our stakeholders
8. Be a model of financial viability and economic stimulation

¹ 2000 Annual Report. Vancouver International Airport Authority

² 2000 Community and Environment Report. Vancouver International Airport Authority.

The Airport Authority's directors and managers view these objectives as highly interdependent, and closely tied to the health, well-being and satisfaction of employees. For instance, success as the Pacific Gateway of choice depends upon continuous improvements in safety, security and customer service, which rests upon a strong and flexible workforce, which can only be achieved with healthy and happy employees. Numerous policy and planning documents stress these relationships, and they are a well understood and deeply held part of the corporate philosophy.

As an example, the 2000 Annual Report states:

Employee satisfaction translates into customer satisfaction, so maintaining a strong, flexible and capable team of professionals is key to our success.

Personal interviews with YVR managers also emphasized the critical role of employee well-being in reaching corporate objectives:

Excellence in safety, security and environment are our core objectives. You're not going to achieve these objectives unless you take care of your employees.

The impetus for YVR's healthy workplace initiatives is therefore ultimately a reflection of the close linkage drawn between employee's well-being and organizational objectives.

Circumstances leading to recent healthy workplace initiatives

In 1992, with the transfer of Airport operations from Transport Canada to the newly created Airport Authority, considerable emphasis was given to infrastructure development; building a new runway and terminal building, and making the operation profitable.

By 1998-99, YVR could detect that its accident rates were growing and that those working on health and safety were experiencing "burnout". Between 1996 and 1999, the number of lost time accidents increased from 6 per year to 22, and days lost rose from 133 per year to 222. According to YVR's safety manager, the Airport Authority viewed the situation as a crisis, and wanted to pause and look at how it might do things differently.

A first step was to hire a new health and safety manager, who began a process of reviewing and assessing all elements of YVR's health and safety system. During this period, YVR's began to move from a regulatory approach, which strives only to meet minimum requirements of health and safety, to what the current health and safety manager describes as a "proactive, caring and people focused approach". As part of these efforts, YVR carried out its first ever employee "climate survey" in the summer of 2000. The survey covered a range of issues from Leadership and Communication to Employee development and Health and Safety. Among the findings was a concern among employees about increasing workload and stress.

As a result of these assessments, and in keeping with the new approach to health and safety, a number of new health and safety initiatives have been introduced at YVR, including a company-wide Wellness Program called *Take Off To Wellness!*

Take Off to Wellness! Program

The rationale for introducing the wellness program is based on both moral and business considerations, as stated in the original program proposal:

Take Off!'s primary goal is to help employees improve their health and quality of life, which can lead to higher morale and job satisfaction. ...A healthy workforce is a productive workforce³.

The wellness program proposal lists six major reasons why the Airport Authority should provide a wellness program:

- Reduction of health care and extended benefit costs
- Leading causes of workplace health problems can be prevented or risks minimized through tobacco and alcohol reduction, increased physical activity and improved nutrition.
- The workforce is more diverse and we must be responsive to a variety of additional health concerns
- The workweek is expanding – longer hours – and can threaten health and well-being – health promotion can alleviate some of this
- The technology revolution is here – people spend their day plugged in, which adds to a sedentary lifestyle
- Stress levels are increasing – education on stress management, exercise and participation in decision-making can reduce stress

III. Healthy Workplace Initiatives at Vancouver Airport

Wellness Program at YVR

The wellness program at YVR is an incentive based program that encourages employees to develop a healthy lifestyle. The program takes a balanced and holistic approach to health promotion, recognizing the physical, psychological and social aspects of wellness. This holistic approach is reflected in the program's seven main components:

³ YVR Health and Safety.

1. *Fitness and Balance Incentive program:*

The Fitness and Balance incentive program is designed to encourage YVR employees to adopt healthy lifestyles by reaching health goals and targeted point levels. It is open to all employees who wish to participate.

Under the program, employees earn points for specific behaviours related to physical activity, participation in wellness sessions, and health assessments such as blood pressure check, mammogram, prostate test, and so on. Points are also earned for educational activities on health related topics, volunteer work in the community, environmental practices such as recycling and using alternative commuting methods (carpooling, public transit, walking, cycling), and weight reduction and healthy weight maintenance. The points system also rewards demonstrations of commitment, including perfect attendance over three months, no lost time injuries over three months, safety suggestions, committee participation and attendance at all-staff meetings.

Employees wishing to participate in the incentive program must first fill out a Fitness and Balance Commitment Form, which is submitted to the YVR Safety Department. Using the honour system, employees record their daily activities and points earned in a personal Fitness and Balance logbook.

Incentive points are accumulated over a 12-month period, and once certain point levels are reached, may be redeemed for an incentive award. The awards consist of small gifts, which increase in value according to the total points accumulated. Examples include mugs, caps, and golf towels at lower point levels, and watches, binoculars and portable CD players at the higher point levels.

2. *Corporate discounts*

Employees receive corporate discounts for selected fitness centres, and well as various retail outlets within the terminal.

3. *Sport / fitness activities and special events*

The Airport Authority supports activities involving employees and their families, such as annual ice hockey family night.

4. *Monthly newsletter*

A one or two-page section appears within the existing employee newsletter, with information on lifestyles, recipes, events and promotion of milestones reached by program participants.

5. *Seminars, Workshops, Educational Brochures and Booklets*

Employees or consultants who are subject matter experts present seminars and workshops in a wide variety of areas. Examples include Balancing Work and Home Life, Personal Development, Cholesterol Testing, Flu and Asthma, and Music Therapy.

6. *Access to fitness facilities and sports equipment*

Fitness facilities are supplied through an employee discount at the hotel gym for those working in the terminal building, and a small gym has been installed in one of the yards for the outside workforce.

Other Recent Healthy Workplace Initiatives

In addition to the wellness program, a number of other initiatives have been introduced at YVR in recent years that enable and support safe work practices and healthy behaviours:

- Pre-shift stretching program for Airfield Maintenance personnel led each morning by a certified fitness instructor
- Shift work awareness programs for all shift workers including an information guide for adapting to shift work. Shift rotations have been designed to minimize build-up of fatigue across nights and minimize shifting of rhythms.
- Annual flu shots: offered to all Airport Authority employees. For those unable to schedule a vaccination date due to shift rotations or other unforeseen circumstances, the Authority will cover up to \$15 for flu shots administered by a family physician.
- Ergonomics Awareness Training and ergonomic standards for all office furniture and equipment, with purchasing policies that ensure appropriate equipment and office ergonomic assessments as required.
- Training sessions in due diligence and accident investigation with all management and staff in high-risk areas; High-voltage safety training with Maintenance personnel; Revised the work practices codes for Trades and Airfield Maintenance
- Hearing Conservation Program (HCP): designed to eliminate or control over-exposure to harmful noise levels and prevent noise induced hearing loss of its employees. The HCP includes noise measurement, education and training, noise control, hearing protection, posting of noise hazard areas, hearing tests, and annual program review and record keeping.
- Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS). A comprehensive program providing information to the safe use of hazardous materials. In conjunction with this, YVR has a chemical purchasing policy which provides a process for procurement of chemical products which is safe and environmentally responsible. Any department requesting a new product must complete a chemical request form and submit to Corporate Procurement Services. All employees receive WHMIS training.

Other programs and activities support and enhance personal coping skills known to have a positive impact on mental and physical health:

- An Employee and Family Assistance Program which offers confidential, professional help for a broad range of personal problems including marital or family distress, alcohol or drug dependence, financial difficulties, emotional problems, bereavement, stress and so on.
- Violence in the workplace: The Authority has taken a proactive approach, with efforts to inform employees about the nature of workplace violence and techniques with which to deal with it. The Authority ensures that employees are made aware of known or foreseeable potential violent situations and has conducted risk assessments, developed policies and procedures to eliminate or minimize workplace violence.
- Checkpoint Discussions: employees can request time with their manager to talk about career development, work assignments, balancing workloads or other issues.
- Return to Work Program: provides opportunity for injured workers to perform modified work during their recovery period.

IV. Management Commitment and Support

Formal Statement

Management's commitment to Health and Safety has been formalized in a new (May, 2000) Health and Safety Commitment Statement, which is included in the New Employee Health & Safety Orientation Guide, and provided to all new employees. It reads, in part:

At YVR, we are committed to providing a safe and healthy environment that starts with our own employees. This means the development of programs designed to foster occupational health and safety and to prevent both illness and injury in our unique working environment. This commitment is based upon the belief that maintaining the economic health of our operations can only be achieved by close co-operation between employer and employees.

According to YVR's health and safety manager, the formulation of the new statement was an important step in facilitating the introduction of new initiatives. To gain buy-in from senior managers, a strategic effort was made to have as signatories, the President of the Airport Authority as well as all Vice-presidents (Engineering, Finance, Commercial Development, Legal and Corporate Admin., Operations, and Information Technology) and the Directors of Human Resources and Airline and Passenger Development.

The importance of health and safety commitment statement was acknowledged by YVR's Airside manager:

The statement gives program managers autonomy. We are rarely questioned about putting in new initiatives.

Integration with Business Strategy

Another demonstration of management's commitment to employee safety, health and wellbeing is its integration of these ideas with business strategy. This is apparent in YVR's use of the "Balanced Scorecard" as a planning, evaluation and reporting tool. The scorecard is balanced in that it includes financial and non-financial measures, and evaluates business from four perspectives – customers, internal business processes, learning and innovation, and financial performance. Within the internal business category, employee safety measures are a key component. As a result, health and safety are part of the structured planning and evaluation framework, and create accountability for company progress. For instance, YVR has a pay for performance program in which Scorecard results - including those pertaining to health and safety – are used to evaluate the performance of directors and managers. However, at this time, individual departments decide how much weight is attached to safety when evaluating managers' performance. YVR is moving to make the role of safety in this framework more specific.

Employee Perceptions of Commitment

When asked to assess the current commitment by management to workplace safety and health, employees consistently described it as "very high". Interviewed employees were well aware that "safety and security are top priorities of management". For workers, a convincing demonstration of managerial commitment to health, safety and wellness comes from direct managerial involvement or participation. Two examples were given:

- Managers who have registered in the wellness program "set a good example for the rest of the staff"
- The senior management executive committee recently spent several days working full shift rotations alongside employees to learn about the issues and difficulties of shift work.

Interviewed employees also feel that commitment on the part of their union and individual employees are extremely important. One respondent noted that health and safety is "one of the things they (union and management) see eye-to-eye on for sure".

Interviewed employees also feel that their co-workers at YVR are committed to the safety and wellness initiatives, and gave several illustrations: high attendance and participation rates in the various wellness activities; people bringing forth ideas for new activities; friends and families getting involved in activities; and employees willingness to pay entry fees for certain activities.

V. Employee Involvement

Planning and Decision Making

When the original proposal to create a wellness program was first developed, it was clear that all parties would not only play important roles in moving the initiatives forward, but

that the ultimate success of the program depended on such involvement. The proposal itself was developed by Airport Authority management, but with important input from employee committees, a review of literature and of existing programs in other organizations.

The wellness program proposal noted several “keys to success”, including support by senior management through resources and participation, and employee involvement in developing and running a program. The proposal clearly stated that the wellness activities would be implemented only once the Learning Education and Development (LEAD) Committee, the Union and senior management had approved all aspects of the program. With approval of the program, a wellness committee was established.

Wellness Committee

The wellness committee is composed of ten members, representing employees in all three main airport divisions, and management, including the health and safety manager. Employee involvement on the committee is voluntary and open to all staff. Employee members of the committee were not appointed by management or by the union, although there is formal union representation on the committee. From the point of view of wellness committee members, the process was “very genuine”. Interest in the wellness committee was so high that, according to one member of the wellness committee, “we actually had to put a cap on people joining”. The wellness committee has monthly meetings.

The committee is a recommending body, but has considerable autonomy to make decisions within the scope of the existing wellness program and its \$34,000 budget. When asked to assess the role of management and employees in the wellness committee, it was clear from the responses of both management and labour that the committee is a highly effective forum for developing and implementing wellness initiatives. In fact, one member of the wellness committee felt that when the committee meets, there is “no distinction between management and union, we’re all there to talk about wellness”. Another employee respondent took this even further, and suggested that there was “equal power in decision making”, although it was recognized by employees, (and confirmed by management), that there were certain limits and parameters beyond which the committee could not make decisions (for example, setting budgets and new spending initiatives).

The program manager indicated that the decision making process – in particular the role of the wellness committee – was working quite well with many examples of staff taking the lead on particular issues.

A Joint Labour Management Approach

Employee input into planning and decision making on the wellness program is not a unique experience at YVR. In fact, the *New Employee Health and Safety Orientation Guide* informs new workers that

The Airport Authority and the Public Service Alliance of Canada, Local 20221, work closely together to anticipate and resolve all safety and health issues in a prompt and practical manner in addition to promoting and

improving the physical, mental and social well-being of the Authority's employees.

The guide also encourages new employees to get involved with the Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee (JOHSC), which is the main committee working to identify and resolve safety and health problems, and the principal forum for joint labour-management consultation. The committee establishes goals and objectives each fiscal year, and produces an annual report of activities for management, employees and its union.

Participation in the Wellness Program

Participation in the wellness program is high, and was almost immediately successful when it began. Wellness committee members noted that on the first day the program was introduced, "at least 100 people signed up". Many employees have pinned their wellness logbooks on their walls. Because employees must register in the program to receive incentive awards, the number of participants is easily obtainable. Currently, 156 employees – about 50% of the staff - are registered in the program.

Commenting on the high rate of participation, one employee said that "it's successful precisely because it's not a top down program."

Members of the wellness committee also estimated that the lunch and learn seminars and workshops regularly draw between 20 and 30 people, but not always the same group.

Interviewed employees were asked if participants in the wellness program were those who would likely have participated in any case. Members of the wellness committee did not agree, indicating that there has been much focus on being inclusive and making the program meaningful for everyone. They felt people were also trying new things, one example being a lunch and learn workshop on sushi making, in which one-half of the participants were male engineers.

If there was one barrier to participation, it was in terms of having time available to participate, even in terms of keeping personal wellness logbooks up to date. It is interesting that the high workloads of employees, which was one reason for the introduction of wellness, was actually felt to be something of a barrier to participation, although a minor one.

Communications

The involvement of employees in YVR's wellness program and in other safety and health activities is critically dependent upon effective communications. YVR uses a variety of methods and tools to provide information and to promote participation in programs and safe working practices:

- Health safety and Wellness bulletin boards in each area of the airport

- Employee newsletter *Connections*
- YVR Health and Safety Intranet website and email

Many of the communications methods are designed to promote strong-two way interactions for the purposes of gaining employee input and feedback. These include:

- Committees
- Safety talks once per week (airfield maintenance)
- All staff meetings
- One on one performance appraisals
- Check point interviews
- Employee company wide surveys

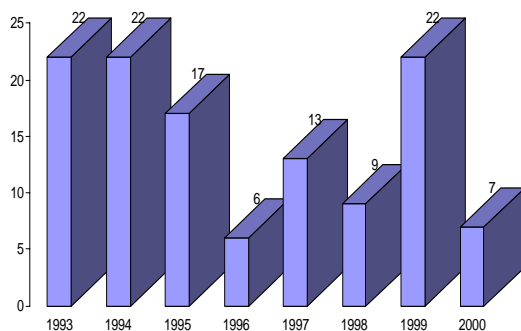
VI. Impacts and Analysis

Management's assessment

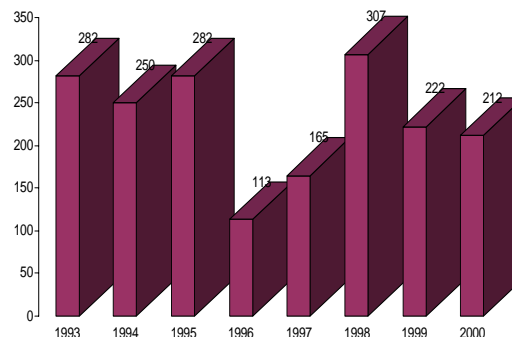
At this time, management has not made any formal assessment of wellness program impacts, primarily because the program was only introduced in May of 2001. In the long term, YVR's Safety Group believes it should contribute to reduced accidents and disability and absenteeism, and increased employee health, productivity, job satisfaction and employee retention. Management is also aware that these benefits may not occur immediately. According to the health and safety manager, the longer-term success and support for YVR's wellness program, as well as other innovative health and safety initiatives will ultimately depend on employee uptake and satisfaction, and whether other corporate performance indicators such as passenger satisfaction are "moving in the right direction".

Nevertheless, there are indications that the range of healthy workplace initiatives introduced in recent years is having a positive impact in a number of areas. The number of lost time accidents and days lost has declined over the past two or three years for which data is available. In Airfield Maintenance, where pre-shift stretching and fitness facilities have been introduced, there have been no reportable incidents for 19 months (at the time of writing).

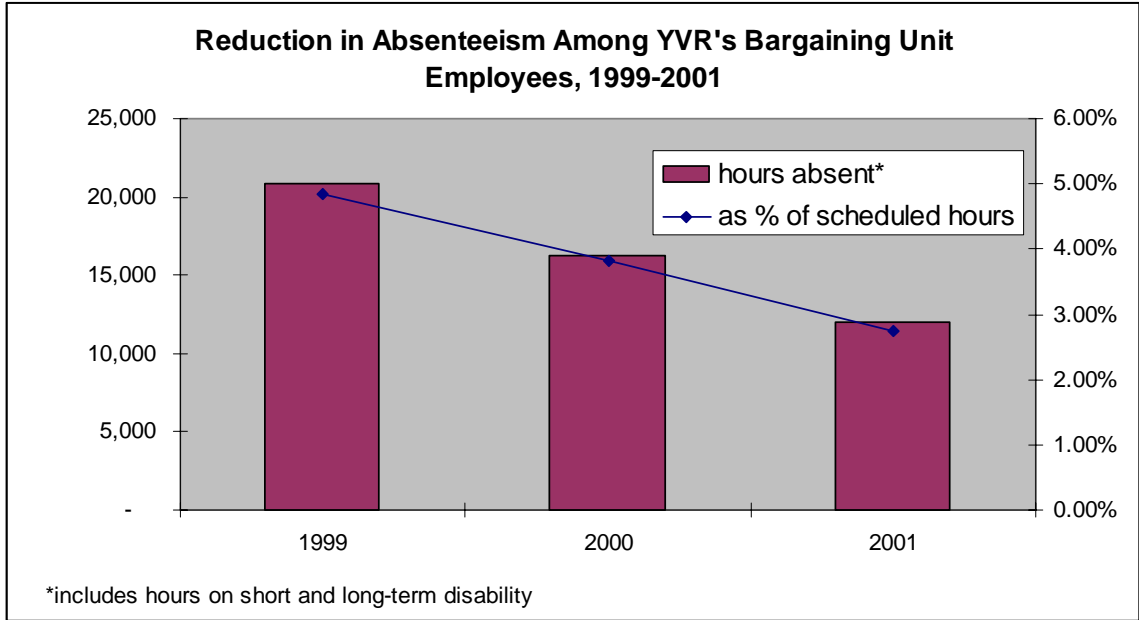
Number of Lost Time Accidents, YVR



Workers Compensation Board Lost Days, YVR



YVR’s safety manager believes that the wellness program has been a contributing factor to the recent reductions in absenteeism rates among bargaining unit employees. Hours lost through short and long term disability fell by 42% between 1999 and 2001, from 20,864 to 12, 047.



In addition, the company-wide employee survey mentioned earlier, which was carried out in the summer of 2000, showed that 75% of YVR employees felt that “a very good job” was being done on health and safety. This proportion was similar across the three main Airport divisions. As a result of these findings, management has kept on with its healthy workplace plans.

In the absence of a formal evaluation of healthy workplace initiatives, managers at YVR were nonetheless able to point to several perceived impacts based on informal observations and daily interactions with staff. The health and safety manager listed three:

- The initiatives have generated trust between labour and management. As a result, it “gives management the flexibility to deal with priority issues because employees know you’ll get back to the other stuff”.
- The workforce is more productive, “people work harder, but work safer”
- Less time is required on occupational health and safety (for example, following up on absentees).

YVR’s Airside manager suggested that the greatest success of the program is morale. But he also believed there were unintended impacts, referring to the social relationships he witnessed developing outside of work.

Employees' assessment

To date, employee satisfaction with the wellness program has not been formally measured or evaluated. Members of the wellness committee said they would like to do such an evaluation “to make the program even better”.

Employees' perceptions of wellness impacts varied, but all interviewed employees viewed them as positive. A variety of positive impacts were mentioned, some relating directly to health and safety, and some extending to perceptions of improved job quality and enhanced business performance:

- Injury reduction: One employee within airside operations indicated that at one time, “Guys were getting hurt with heavy lifting” but since the introduction of the pre-work stretching programs (along with all the other initiatives), there have been “no lost time accidents”. “Now it doesn't happen, guys are more aware”).
- Healthy and happy workers
- Team building
- Reduced stress
- Improved social relations, both at work and outside of work. One employee commented on the “great camaraderie” among workers in his area. Also, people are going for health check-ups and sharing results with other employees, further increasing awareness of good health practices
- Empowerment to better their lives
- Impacts beyond the workplace: involvement of spouse and kids
- Pride in the company: “people want to feel good about the company they work for”, this leads to increased loyalty, less turnover, better service, and positive exposure for the company in the community.

VII. Future Directions and Lessons Learned

Management perspective

According to the health and safety manager, one of the major challenges in designing and implementing the workplace health initiatives is the commitment of time necessary to “get it off the ground”. There was also some concern that the provision of wellness services and activities raises expectations: “the more good products you produce, the more is expected of you in the future”. This can be a potential problem given that in many if not most instances “resources are ultimately limited”.

Other lessons learned include:

- World-class results require world-class effort. You want to save big money? You have to spend big money.

- Success around health, safety and wellness based on two principles: 1) fixed accountability 2) measurement of outcomes.
- In order to create and maintain a successful safety culture – employees must believe the company cares. But perhaps most important, employees must be accountable for themselves. It absolutely cannot be regulation driven. This means the company must go beyond or develop an alternative to the regulatory approach, and cannot simply focus on high risk issues alone.

YVR's priorities for further workplace health initiatives are to implement a fully developed Occupational Health and Safety management system to ISO 18000 standards. It also has plans to carry out further internal auditing of YVR's high-risk group activities and systems. Finally, the Health and Safety Department plans to take stock of where it is to determine where it wants to go. "We've done all this, but where are we, what's missing, and where do we go from here?"

Employee perspective

Employees summarized their experiences with YVR's healthy workplace initiatives in three main points:

- "It works. It affects the bottom line of the business in a positive way, and greatly enhances loyalty among employees".
- "It has a tremendous impact on attitudes and awareness, which are the biggest thing in creating safe workplaces."
- Reflecting on the diversity and complexity of the Airport operation, employees said "if it works here, it can work anywhere".