

Housekeeper Jessica Nolan, left, and housekeeping manager Kim Balcom chat about safe use of the floor polisher at St. Eugene Golf Resort and Casino in Cranbrook.

Shift safely into summer

By Helena Bryan

Zipline guides for Whistler's Ziptrek Ecotours Inc. work in spectacular terrain, but the job is hardly a walk in the park.

It's not easy navigating guests through a steep swath of ancient forest between Whistler and Blackcomb Mountains — via ziplines no less, sometimes 89 metres above ground.

And, like other B.C. employers, Ziptrek goes into overdrive in the summer to accommodate a spike in business. That means the number of employees doubles to 140 or more, many of them young workers. These new hires must get up to speed quickly to meet the demands of the season.

Good thing, then, that Ziptrek has made it a priority to keep its employees and guests safe since it launched the very first zipline a decade ago. "We simply can't have safety issues, ever — the foundation of our guest experience is safety," says Liza Walli, director of Human Resources for Ziptrek.

"To provide an exceptional experience for guests, our guides have to feel safe first. This enables them to guide with confidence."

That kind of safety-first attitude is even more important during seasonal transitions, says WorkSafeBC occupational safety officer Jeff McKay in Cranbrook. McKay has worked closely with the local, safety-oriented St. Eugene Golf Resort and Casino.

"When operations shift into high gear or are in flux, and new workers come on board — many of them young and inexperienced — employers have even more incentive to provide proper planning, training, supervision, and evaluation."

Keeping seasonal workers out of harm's way is a concern for a range of B.C. industries — fishing, construction, forestry, landscaping — but the hospitality and tourism sector is especially vulnerable. In fact, during the past five years in B.C., 9,400 young workers in this sector suffered on-the-job injuries severe enough to keep them from working — a cost of \$20 million.

"Those injuries are preventable," McKay says, "no matter what the season."

More than a single training session

For Ziptrek, keeping employees safe during the busy summer months involves rigorous orientation and training that begins before the May long weekend.

"We let them know what their rights and responsibilities are, not just at St. Eugene, but wherever they work."

— Cheryl Elliott, director of human resources for St. Eugene Golf Resort and Casino

New hires spend two weeks acquiring the technical skills necessary for the job. "Eighty percent of the training is hands-on, technical in nature, and safety-focused," Walli says.

Lead guides with at least three seasons of experience teach newbies about two-way radio communication protocols, proper use of tether and fall-restraint systems, and safe launching and landing. New hires hone these skills at a special practice site before on-course training from senior guides, or mentors, begins.

Mentoring, supervision, and accountability

Ziptrek assistant course manager Marc Menard says the training process is ultra-conservative: "We have an extensive index of skills we tick off before they're guiding on their own. We watch them in action with mentors and we never sign-off anyone — unless they've safely demonstrated all guide responsibilities to the mentor guides."

Ziptrek staff pair new guides with senior guides and ensure lead guides are on the course every day to provide overall supervision.

No employer too small

Fortunately, Ziptrek isn't the only hospitality and tourism employer to set a good example.

Take Green Acres Lakeside Cottage Resort on Salt Spring Island, for example. In the summer, the resort quadruples its year-round housekeeping staff of two in order to tend to its 12 cottages and eight chalets. Most of the new hires are between 15 and 18 years old, says assistant manager Shinobu Murata. "There's a lot of heavy lifting, moving furniture, and repetitive motion — so it's challenging work."



Brenna McIntyre, an employee for Green Acres Lakeside Resort, uses safe bending techniques to prepare guestrooms under the supervision of assistant manager Shinobu Murata.

Hiring begins in February and training as early as March. “We want our new employees to be able to ease into the busy summer season,” Murata says. And, during the four-day training program, “we assume they know nothing, because often this is their very first job.”

Training starts with a one-day orientation, then two days of job shadowing with a senior employee. On the fourth day, Murata assesses how each employee is doing, and only gives that employee the okay to work independently once she’s comfortable he or she is following health and safety protocols. “Even then, we make sure that person never feels alone,” she says.

“I have an open-door policy; employees can come to me and ask questions as often as they need to.”

No employer too big

With a 125-room hotel, golf course, and casino, St. Eugene resort in Cranbrook keeps 200 employees busy year-round. Three years ago, in response to a high number of housekeeping employees reporting strains, St. Eugene began developing a well-oiled overall health

and safety program that includes an active health and safety committee and consistent on-site training and supervision.

Thanks to that program — spearheaded in part by housekeeping staff manager Kim Balcom — the 100 additional workers hired to meet the booming summertime golf and hotel trade aren’t short-shrifted when it comes to health and safety.

“We know who we’re hiring by March,” says Cheryl Elliott, director of human resources. “And we begin training before April.” Because most new hires are young, “we start with the basics,” she says. “We let them know what their rights and responsibilities are, not just at St. Eugene, but wherever they work.”

Housekeeping employees perform stretching exercises at every morning meeting, based on a physiotherapist’s recommendations for reducing the risk of strains. And there’s a limit on how many rooms are done in a day. If there’s any uncertainty around whether a worker can physically handle the job, he or she is sent to a physiotherapist for a test on functional abilities.

New hires are paired up with each other, and Balcom and her supervisory team regularly follow up to ensure they're continuing to do the job safely. "If not, we issue a discipline," she says. "In the past three years, we've only had to issue two of these."

Elliott says the key to the resort's success comes from having strong support from senior management, which backs up the great work of its joint occupational health and safety committee.

"Our labour costs used to be really high, but not anymore," she says. "Because people aren't getting hurt, and turnover is low."

Clearly, when operations are ramped up, it takes extra effort to train and supervise seasonal employees to work safely. Neglecting to do so is not an option. As the workload rises, so does the risk of injury.

Construction risks rise in summer

Similarly, construction is a year-round enterprise, but in the warmer, drier spring and summer months, demand booms — and with it, the risk of falls from elevation. This is especially so in the residential construction sector, where falls from heights are the leading cause of injury, accounting for 17 percent of claims and 29 percent of costs.

What's more, falls also account for a high rate of serious injury.

This spring, WorkSafeBC will be reaching out to the construction industry in an effort to reduce falls from heights by addressing underlying attitudes.

"We talked to workers, supervisors, and employers. Through this research, we learned one of the key reasons construction workers avoid taking proper precautions is because they don't want to look bad in front of their peers," says Kerri Buschel, WorkSafeBC director of marketing. "They don't want to be known as 'the one who questioned something to do with safety.'"

Buschel says the initiative aims to empower workers and employers to speak up for safety.

North Vancouver-based WorkSafeBC regional prevention manager Gary McComb says injuries occur when the focus is on meeting production schedules, particularly during the busy season.

"It's not just falls from roofs and buildings, but also from ladders. And often workers aren't using their safety gear properly."

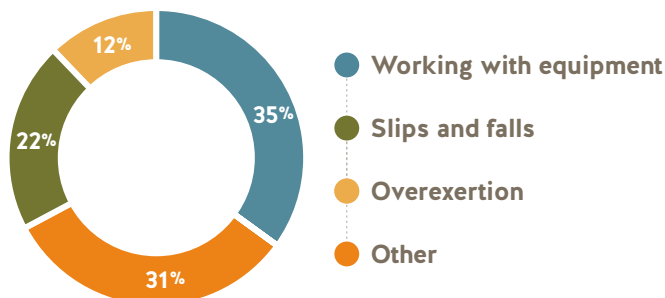
McComb has seen employees not using fall protection gear at all, or dragging lines around that aren't tied off — a phenomenon he calls "cosmetic compliance."

"The work comes on and construction companies crew up, often with young, inexperienced workers who end up in supervisory roles. And, production starts to outweigh safety."

Beginning in May, the fall prevention initiative will target construction companies across B.C. For more information, watch the Announcements section of worksafebc.com. ☺

Protect your young workers

Top causes of young worker injury:



Young worker safety checklist:

- ☐ Assume they know nothing
- ☐ Provide orientation and training
- ☐ Encourage questions
- ☐ Retrain before each new task
- ☐ Provide ongoing supervision
- ☐ Hold them accountable