

Michael King, safety and loss prevention manager for Vancouver's Fairmont Waterfront, discusses the safe use of cleaning tools with room attendant Zenaida Rabaya.

Hotel makes room for aging workforce

By Helena Bryan
and Lucy Hyslop

For the uninitiated, the differences might be hard to spot. But look closely, and it becomes clear that the Fairmont Waterfront Hotel pays more than just lip service to employee health and safety.

For starters, the handles on extendable poles used by housekeeping staff for floor cleaning and high surfaces — and the bed-making tools — have wider grips, making them easier to hold by hands affected by arthritis. Then, there are the mops with extendable and adjustable handles for less strain on backs and knees, and a new technique for bending and squatting while making beds that minimizes stress on backs and joints.

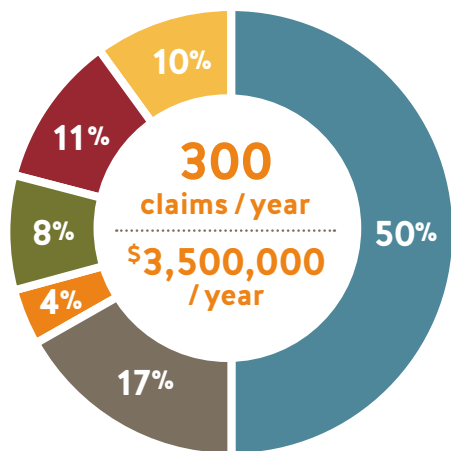
These simple, yet effective, innovations are part of the hotel's unique return-to-work (RTW) and disability management programs, both designed to accommodate veteran workers — particularly its 60-plus room attendants, a large number in their 40s, 50s, and up.

"We realize we have an aging housekeeping workforce," says Michael King, the hotel's safety and loss prevention manager. "They're more susceptible than their younger colleagues to chronic conditions like arthritis or hip and knee problems. On top of that, they risk muscle strains, lower back and shoulder issues, or repetitive stress injuries associated with the job. And, they take longer to recover from their injuries. So it's more challenging to develop their return-to-work plans.

"The mindset that you can't work until you're fully fit simply isn't true anymore."

—Michael King, safety and loss prevention manager for the Fairmont Waterfront Hotel

2008–2012 hotel injury claims:



- Housekeeping staff
- Servers, bartenders
- Cooks, kitchen helpers
- Caretakers, labourers
- Front desk, sales clerks, managers
- Other

“We also recognize the value of these veteran employees. We have a core group of room attendants who’ve been with us since the hotel opened in 1991. They’re the ones who know the job inside and out. Their skill sets are significant, and they’ve contributed an awful lot to this company. So we want to support them through difficult times.”

Hotel staff serve up their own suggestions

The hotel’s joint occupational health and safety committee developed these programs 14 years ago, based on extensive employee feedback. They aim to get employees back to regular duties quickly after an illness or injury — in keeping with a mountain of research demonstrating the psychological and physical benefits of a speedy return to regular activities.

“Being back at work makes people feel more worthwhile,” says WorkSafeBC occupational health and safety officer Laddie MacKinnon.

“In fact, it’s been proven that the longer people are off work, the more it diminishes their happiness and their view of themselves. The longer they’re off, the worse they’ll be.”

What makes the Fairmont Waterfront’s approach truly unique is just how much input employees have in their own RTW or disability management plans — and the level of support from their employer, along with medical and nurse advisors, during the return to work.

“When employees come back after time off from injury or illness, we focus on what they can do, not on what they can’t do,” King says. “And we trust them to let us know what that is — whether it means cleaning fewer rooms at the start, working fewer days than usual, or performing different duties until they’re fully healed.

“The mindset that you can’t work until you’re fully fit simply isn’t true anymore.”

The same goes for the disability management program the hotel offers for employees on permanent disability.

“We have nine employees on permanent disability, and they’ve told us they want to continue doing the same job. So we did everything we could to make that happen. If it meant reviewing how a chore is done or creating new equipment, we were prepared to do that,” King says.

The Hazards of housekeeping

How are housekeepers getting injured?

Thirty percent of injuries are from overexertion, 21 percent from falls on the same level, and 18 percent from having objects or equipment strike against them.

What body parts are affected?

Thirty-two percent of the injuries are to backs, 12 percent to shoulders, and 11 percent to multiple body parts.

“We work with our employees to find out how far they can comfortably go with disabilities, and we’ll create a plan that works with their limitations.

“Some of our attendants have focused on reducing their working days as they approach retirement — whatever will help them accomplish recovery and manage their health issues.”

Employee morale receives a boost

For employees, the benefits of such flexible programs are immeasurable, says Bruce Callaghan, in-room supervisor and a 10-year member of the hotel’s joint occupational health and safety committee.

“I’ve seen these long-term employees, who, through no fault of their own, get hit by something like rheumatoid arthritis or knee problems,” Callaghan says. “With the company’s support, they can continue to feel like a valuable part of the organization. It makes you feel good to see that.”

The benefits go both ways, says King, who started at the Fairmont five years before the RTW and disability management programs were initiated. He can attest firsthand to their value. Without such programs, he says, other employees would have to pick up the slack, resulting in overtime pay. Or, new employees would need training — and even then, would be unlikely to achieve the same calibre of work as their more experienced predecessors.

“It’s in the employer’s best interest to provide employees with the tools they need to do the work,” he says. “And that means supporting them through the good and the not-so-good times.”

Besides, good RTW and disability management programs boost morale, because employees feel more valued and secure in their jobs. And that, King says, won’t be overlooked — even by the uninitiated. ☺

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