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Subject: A Proposal for Initializing a Fatigue Risk Management Program for WestJet Airport Agents

**Introduction**

Fatigue, a feeling of tiredness, can affect an individual’s physical and cognitive ability to function normally, and it runs the risk of being cumulative and contributing to serious and fatal consequences. Many industries that are safety-critical, where safety is of the most paramount importance and where failure of safety may mean loss of life or severe injury, have regulations or a program for fatigue risk management to protect their workers where fatigue is accounted for an endangering occupational health and safety hazard. One prominent example of this is the aviation industry where flight crew (such as pilots and flight attendants) are regulated by government transportation departments to have specific flight duty periods that restrict their time in the air. The constraints on their working hours is to mitigate the fatigue risk that could cause impairment to cognitive and physical abilities such as reduced alertness, impaired attention and decision making, and lapses in performance that could lead to serious consequences for the crew member as well as the passengers on board.

There are many regulations mandated by councils and government departments for these specific groups of workers; however, for agents working in local hub airports, airports that have concentrated airport traffic and flight operations, this risk is mainly overlooked.

**Statement of Problem**

In the past few years, when WestJet was growing as an airline, there were many days where agents would be short-staffed, without much support in manpower and leaders, as agents assigned to work on the day would be unable to come to work. A cycle began to grow where those agents, who would have to stretch themselves thin to support the daily operations, would call in sick and other agents would have to fill in for their missed work, and those other agents who would have to pick up more responsibilities to keep up daily operations would become to a point where they are unable to come to work.

WestJet airport agents at the Vancouver International Airport already have to operate under highly stressful situations and events that are time and safety constrained, working sometimes in more than 8 to 12+ hour long shifts. This is also an environment where many events may have a sudden change such as a delay flight due to irregular operations such as aircraft maintenance or weather, and with already so few agents available at work, the stress and fatigue that falls on the remaining agents increase drastically. As a result, fatigue accumulates for all agents at the airport and a maladaptive cycle is formed.

**Proposed Solution**

This proposal offers a starting plan for fatigue risk management for local Vancouver International Airport WestJet agents to Operational Shift Leads and Irregular Operations Coordinators, where the first initial step would be to identify the current level of stress and fatigue in agents, whether there is an awareness of this fatigue risk that happens to every individual (regardless of the industry or the type of work they do), and the current level of support that is available to the local agents. Once this information is collected, then recommendations can be provided on the basis of that information, and given the feasibility of the recommendations, promote a better healthier alternative arrangement to possible tasks or staff management.

A possible simple solution may be increasing awareness of fatigue risk and ways to mitigate this hazard (through including advice sections in the monthly company newsletters, being acknowledged and addressed by senior management in company wide meetings) and providing resources to local agents to utilize to prevent fatigue risk, such as more organized break times, having agents who work a schedule without specific hours be on call to support short manpower, focusing on staff management in terms of localizing agents in a certain area of the airport to receive and send off only domestic flights, only international flights or only transborder flights (flights between US and Canada).

**Scope**

To assess the feasibility of creating a fatigue risk management program for local WestJet agents at the Vancouver International Airport, I plan to investigate these areas of inquiry:

* What are the current schedules of agents, and what are their areas of duties they complete within those hours?
* What is the average amount of overtime they have to commit over operational delays, and how regular are these operational delays that affect their hours of work?
* What are the current resources available to the agents if they are unable to continue working or become hazardous to themselves and others because of fatigue?
* What are their current levels of fatigue and stress (compared to the duties that they do and the time constraint)? Do agents recognize that they have fatigue and if they do, what ways are they mitigating this risk themselves?
* What are the senior managers doing to overcome the challenges of over-stressing their agents?

**Methods**

My primary data sources will come from interviews with one or two WestJet customer/baggage service agents at the Vancouver International Airport, an Operational Shift Lead and an Irregular Operations Coordinator, where the focus is on the impact of irregular or disruptive operations on themselves, the individuals they work with, and the company, if they understand fatigue risk, as well as the resources available to them or by the company. To round out the interviews, I will also include a survey for agents that asks for their current shifts and duties and for feedback on their feeling of fatigue and stress compared to their shifts and duties.

My secondary sources will come from publications of existing fatigue risk management programs and research completed by Transport Canada on the risk of fatigue in regards to the aviation industry.

**My Qualifications**

Being as a former employee of WestJet, and still closely acquainted with the company, I am familiar with their processes, terminology, and work environment. While at WestJet, I have also worked in many different areas (from customer service agent to baggage service agent to Irregular Operations Coordinator) that can give me an overall insight and better understanding on the issues pertaining specifically to each area, with the previous work association allowing me an opportunity for an in-depth industry review on fatigue risk for local airport agents.

**Conclusion**

Fatigue is a serious occupational hazard that needs to be addressed for all employees, whether it be in a safety-critical industry or not, and it has lasting impacts for the individual and their health. With fatigue risk properly addressed, I would be able to see my previous colleagues succeed in their career field with a healthier lifestyle, improve safe increased productivity for the company, as well as to bring a wider notice and awareness to fatigue risk management in a hectic environment that is very easy to forget about an individual’s own needs. With your approval, I would begin research to promote a starting fatigue risk management problem to WestJet Operational Leads and Irregular Operations Coordinator who can enact on the suggestions being recommended for local airport agents, as well as submit a plan to WestJet headquarters for the feasibility and enactment of such a program Canada-wide.