

LIFE

Shovel-ready: Researchers to publish guide on work-life balance for prospective miners

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News Reporter

A pair of researchers from the University of Vienna travelled nearly 7,500 kilometres to get a sense of what it's like for Yukon workers who work by travelling in and out of mining camps.

Since 2014, Gertrude Saxinger and Susanna Gartler have been coming to the territory a few times a year and studying the Yukon's mining camps where workers rotate between working in camps and living at home.

They've conducted nearly 100 interviews with mine workers and their families to get a sense of how to successfully navigate the lifestyle.

"Your life takes place in two different realms: in the workplace, in the camps for ... weeks and then the same amount of time back home," Saxinger said.

"It's an unusual way of life. Under which circumstances can people cope well with these specifics and turn working in the mines and in the mining sector into a sustainable and long term career?"

Saxinger and Gartler used their research to create the *Mobile Workers Guide*, slated to be released this June.

The 64-page guide is written in plain English, the kind of conversational talk you'd expect to hear if an experienced miner were chatting with a newbie about the pros and cons of the job.

It offers pointers on topics like maintaining a good relationship with your spouse, learning to manage your money and dealing with the risk of drug and

alcohol use.

It's all about giving workers more information, Saxinger said, so they know what they might be getting into and can be prepared.

"You can discuss these potential issues with your spouse, with your friends, with your family. You can design your life around the specifics."

The researchers spoke to workers with a variety of jobs within the mining sector from camp cooks to miners, men and women, First Nation and non-First Nation people.

The project is part of a social science research program being run out of Yukon College in partnership with Lakehead University.

Saxinger, who has done similar research in Russia, said most of the people she talked to in the territory have developed good coping skills.

When it comes to maintaining relationships with your spouse while away at camp, miners say be in touch regularly, but don't get too involved in conflicts or crisis back home.

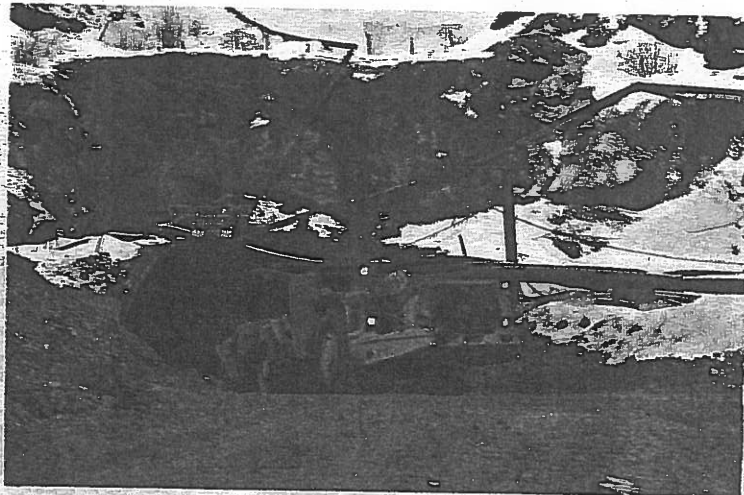
"(It's) finding your balance between letting people know what you're doing ... and knowing what's going on at home without getting too involved, especially in situations where you can't help," Gartler said.

If you can avoid it, don't break up over the phone.

"We heard about the Dear John calls or text messages. Please avoid that," Saxinger said.

It's about more than being nice, they said. This kind of stress can lead to dangerous situations on the mine site.

"It really affects the labour safety. Your own safety and that of the crew you are



A vehicle emerges from the Wolverine mine in October 2014.

Robert Gebauer photo

working with. Think about working underground or operating heavy vehicles. You have to be totally concentrating all the time," Saxinger said.

The research is being done in partnership with the First Nation of Nacho Nyäk Dun. The First Nation is co-publisher of the guidebook and much of the research happened on its traditional territory.

"The community of Nacho Nyäk Dun was very open in sharing their ideas about the pros and cons of mining, how they experienced it," Saxinger said.

"I think Nacho Nyäk Dun in this way does a great job to contribute to science."

Miners were asked whether this type of work go together well with traditional activities like living on the land and hunting.

It can, the researchers said.

"For most people we talked to, it does go together well, especially if the

companies provide for extra time off during hunting season, for example," Gartler said.

"There must be a certain amount of flexibility on the side of the companies. At the same time there has to be a certain flexibility or acknowledgement on the side of the workers towards the needs of the company."

If people want to spend their time hunting and living off the land, that doesn't come cheap, Saxinger said. It often requires expensive equipment like trucks or four wheelers. Mining — and its high paycheques — can help with that.

"If you have a steady job in a well-paid sector, of course this helps you," she said.

When it comes to money, Saxinger and Gartler are encouraging both workers and mine companies to focus on money management skills.

"It's a generational thing: The experienced workers in

their 50s say to us, 'When I was 30 or 25 I didn't think about my body getting sore at some point,' Saxinger said.

"It is hard work. Whatever job you do, even if you're the camp cook, it's really hard."

Even if your body doesn't give out, there's a chance that the industry will, they said.

"Since the industry is such a volatile industry, an operation might shut down a week later and before you know it you're sitting on a house and a mortgage and you're stuck with a lot of debt," Gartler said.

The guide also touches on the risk of alcohol and drug use among mine workers. Mines in the Yukon are dry, meaning no drugs or alcohol allowed, Saxinger said.

For some people binge drinking can happen during their free time at home, she said. For others, being away from drugs and alcohol for

a time, and the potential drug tests when they go back to work, can lead to sobriety even at home.

"We had that in our interviews, as soon as they decided to go into the mining sector they have to think about it, 'What do I do about my drug and alcohol abuse? Do I do it or not?'" Saxinger said.

Gartler said she was surprised about how little she heard about outright sexism or racism on Yukon mine sites.

"I'm not saying there was none of that, but I was surprised to see that there were quite few reports."

One theory is that it may have something to do with the small size of Yukon mine camps.

One interviewee told the researchers she felt more uncomfortable in Alberta's large mining camps with 1,000 people, relative to the few hundred people who work together in Yukon camps.

More women are working in mines though the guide mentions some still feel they have to show more ambition than their male coworkers and have to prove their qualifications.

Women in Yukon mines mostly said they felt comfortable coming forward to complain to their boss about mistreatment if they have to, Saxinger said.

The guide has been endorsed by the Yukon Chamber of Mines. Once it's printed, Gartler and Saxinger hope to give it out to mining companies and Yukon College's Centre for Northern Innovation in Mining to give to students. It will also be available online.

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