



How new businesses get their start in workplace health and safety: implications for research and policy

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IWH Speaker Series
April 21, 2026

Acknowledgements

IWH Research Team

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Collaborators

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Funding



Project advisory committee

CFIB , Canadian Federation of Independent Business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marvin Cruz, Director of Research
IHSA , Infrastructure Health & Safety Association	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key Rayner, Vice-President Market Development & Communications • Tim Melo, Supervisor Customer Service & Small Business
MLITSD , Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training & Skills Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adina Croitoru, Program Specialist, Small Business
OHCOW , Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eduardo Huesca, Community Outreach and Program Coordinator
WSIB , Workplace Safety & Insurance Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vanessa Blount, Program Management Consultant, Workplace Health and Safety Services
WSN , Workplace Safety North	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mike Parent, President & CEO • Cindy Hunter, Operational Excellence & Collaboration
WSPS , Workplace Safety & Prevention Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shawn Chadwick, Health and Safety Consultant

Introduction

Why focus on new businesses?

- Research gap regarding new businesses and occupational health and safety (OHS) (**Van Eerd, Robson, Yanar et al., 2026)
- About 100K employer businesses created in Canada each year (ISED, 2025)
- New businesses are likely prone to increased risk of worker injury/ illness/ fatality
 - Small businesses (Mendeloff et al. 2006)
 - Short tenure employees (Morassaei et al. 2013)

***Van Eerd, Robson, Yanar, et al. Early OHS interventions for small businesses: an environmental scan. American Journal Industrial Medicine 2026;69*

OHS system in Ontario (public sector): policy approaches to primary prevention

Policy approaches	Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training & Skills Development (MLITSD)	Health & Safety Associations (HSAs)	Workplace Safety & Insurance Board (WSIB)
Carrots: Incentives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supporting Ontario's Safe Employers Program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Certificate of Recognition (COR) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Health & Safety Excellence Program
Sticks: Enforcement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> OHS inspectorate 		
Sermons: Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> MLITSD web pages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training, information, and consultation services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Health & Safety Excellence Program

Vedung E. *Carrots, Sticks & Sermons – Policy Instruments and their Evaluation*, 1998.

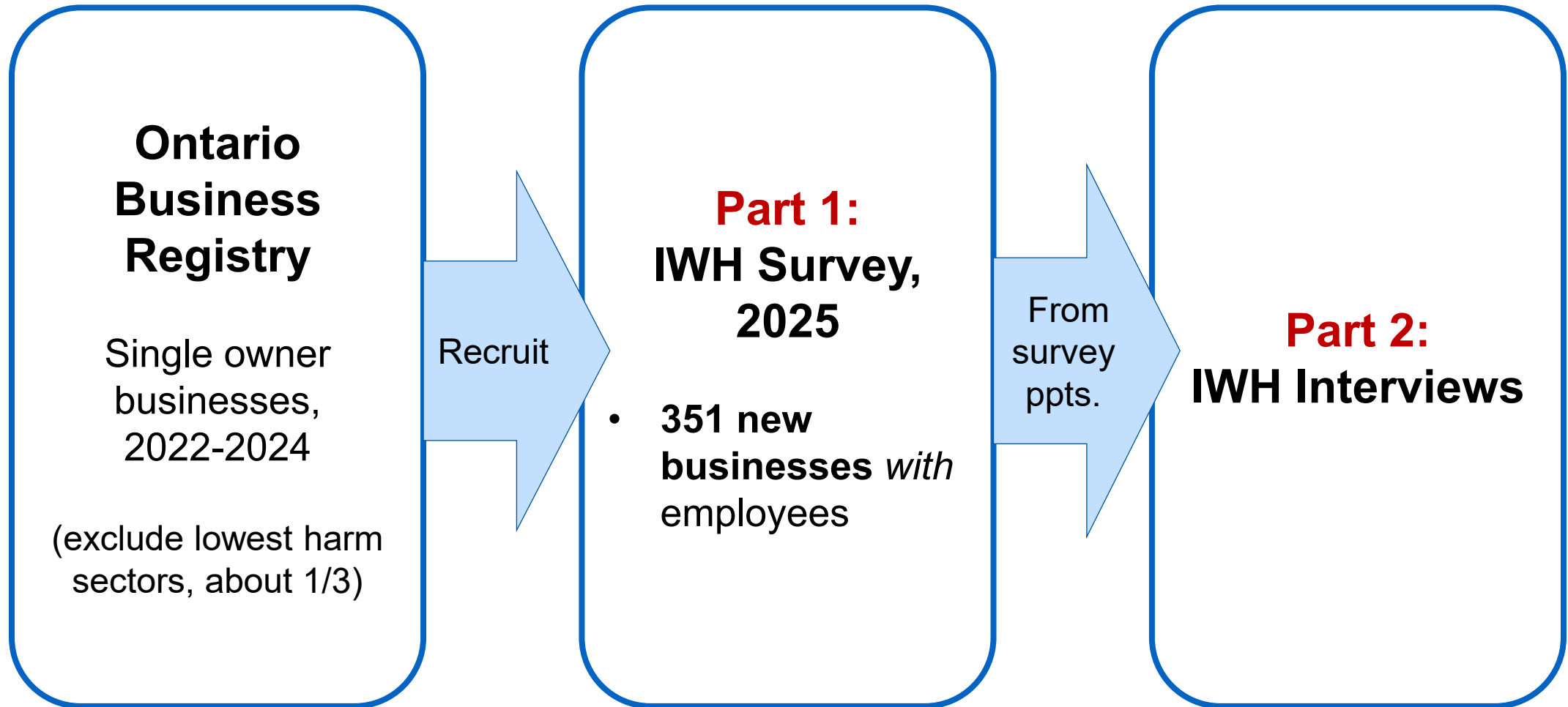
Research objectives

1. Describe initiation of OHS management by new businesses
2. Identify and describe the factors associated with the initiation of OHS management



3. Explore reaction of new businesses to possible future interventions

Study design



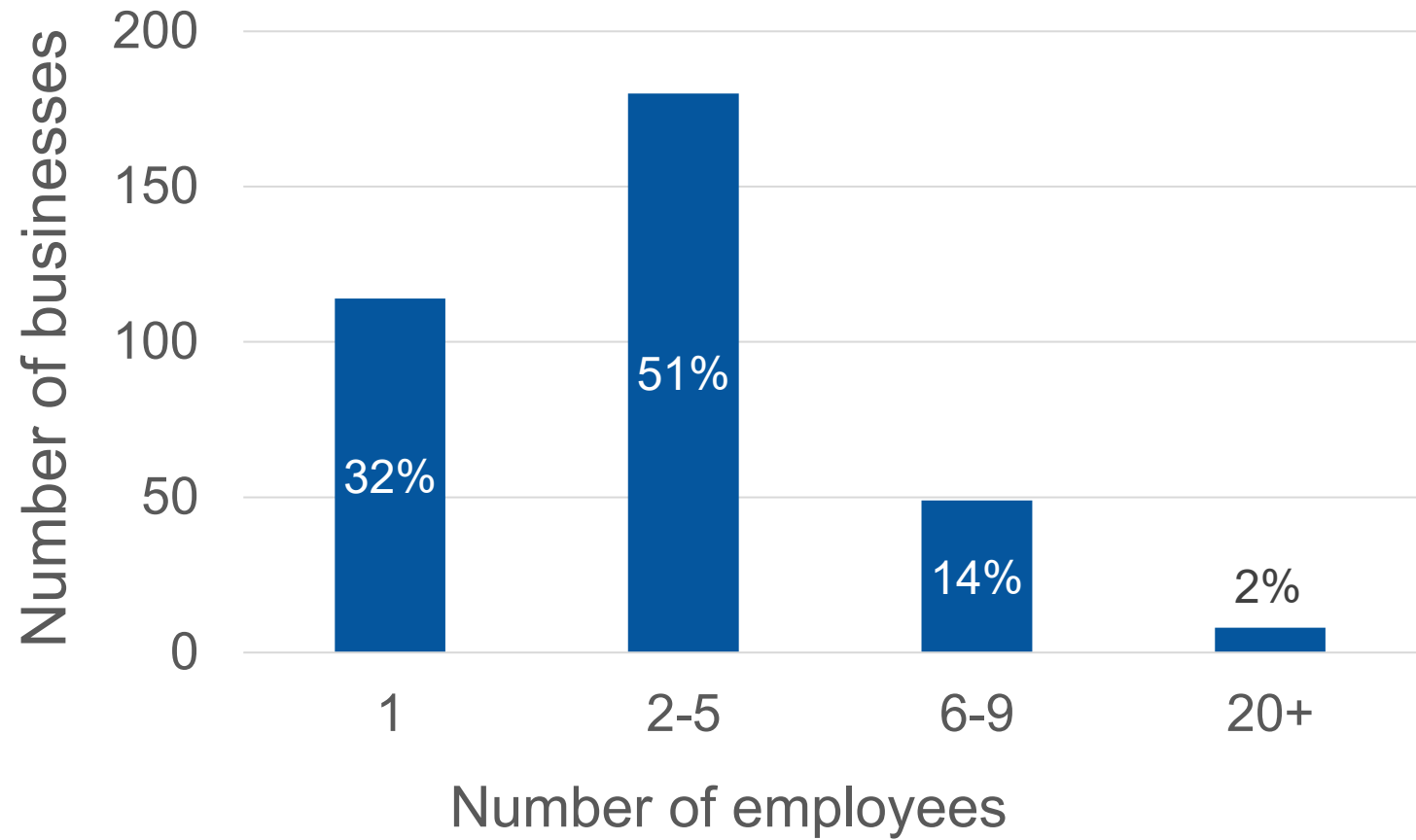
Survey participants - characteristics

Who completed the survey?

- 88% owners (12% managers)
- 97% involved in day-to-day operations
- 56% born in Canada; 44% immigrants
- 40% White, 14% Black, 9% South Asian, 8% East/Southeast Asian, 8% Latin American, 7% Middle Eastern, 6% Mixed/Other, 1% Indigenous, 8% not reported
- 55% men, 40% women, 1% non-binary, 4% prefer to not answer
- 64% with **no prior experience as owner / sr. mgr. operations**

Business sizes

Microbusinesses predominate

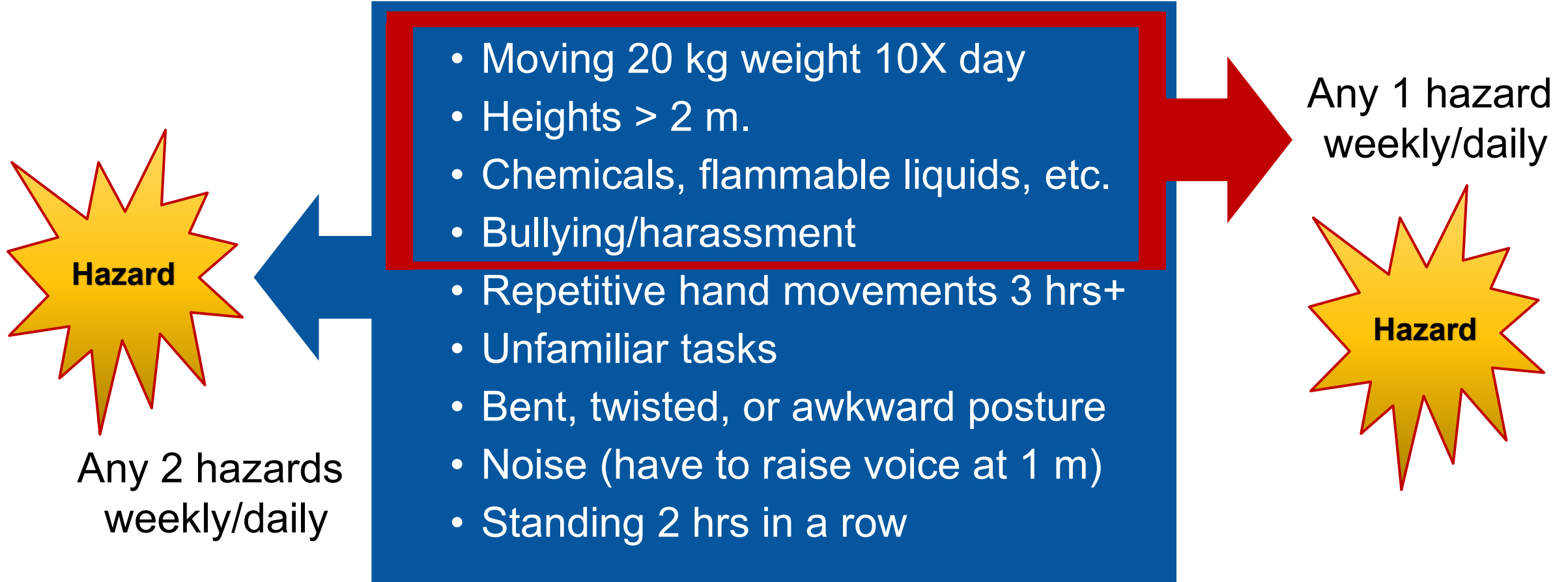


Industrial sectors

Industrial sector	# of businesses	% of businesses
Construction	84	24.0
Retail trade	68	19.4
Building support, esp. janitorial	52	14.8
Health care and social assistance	38	10.8
Accommodation and food services	24	6.8
Manufacturing	23	6.6
Transportation	14	4.0
Other	47	13.4
TOTAL	350	99.7

Industry missing, n = 1

Hazardous exposures: 48% of the businesses



***Based on IWH OHS Vulnerability Measure (Smith et al., 2015; Lay et al. 2017)*

Results

Measuring OHS management: counting actions done

- **Question: “...to what extent have you carried out the following actions for your new business?”**

- *Nothing done at this time*

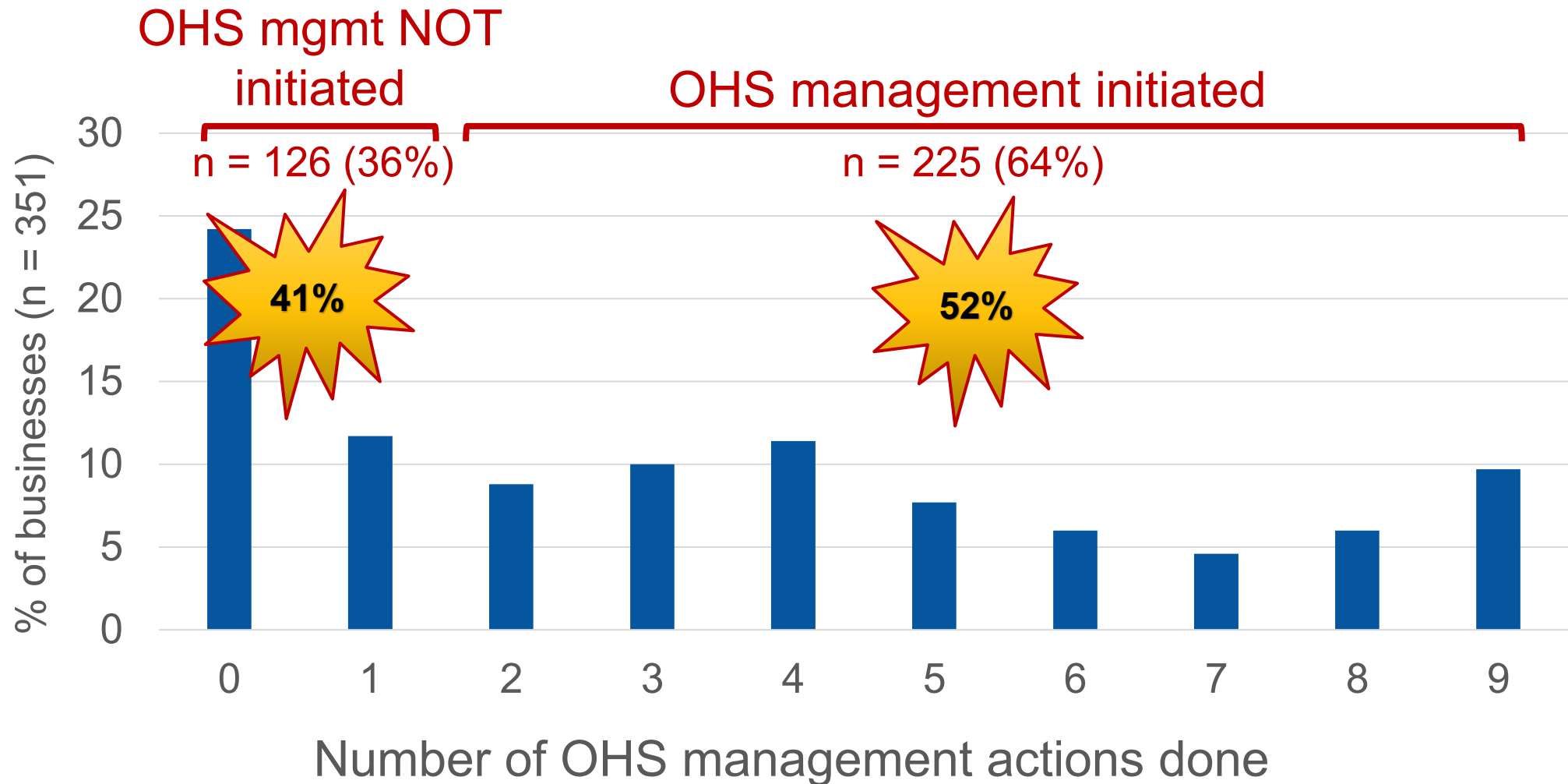
- *Done some work on it*

- ***Done this or put it in place***

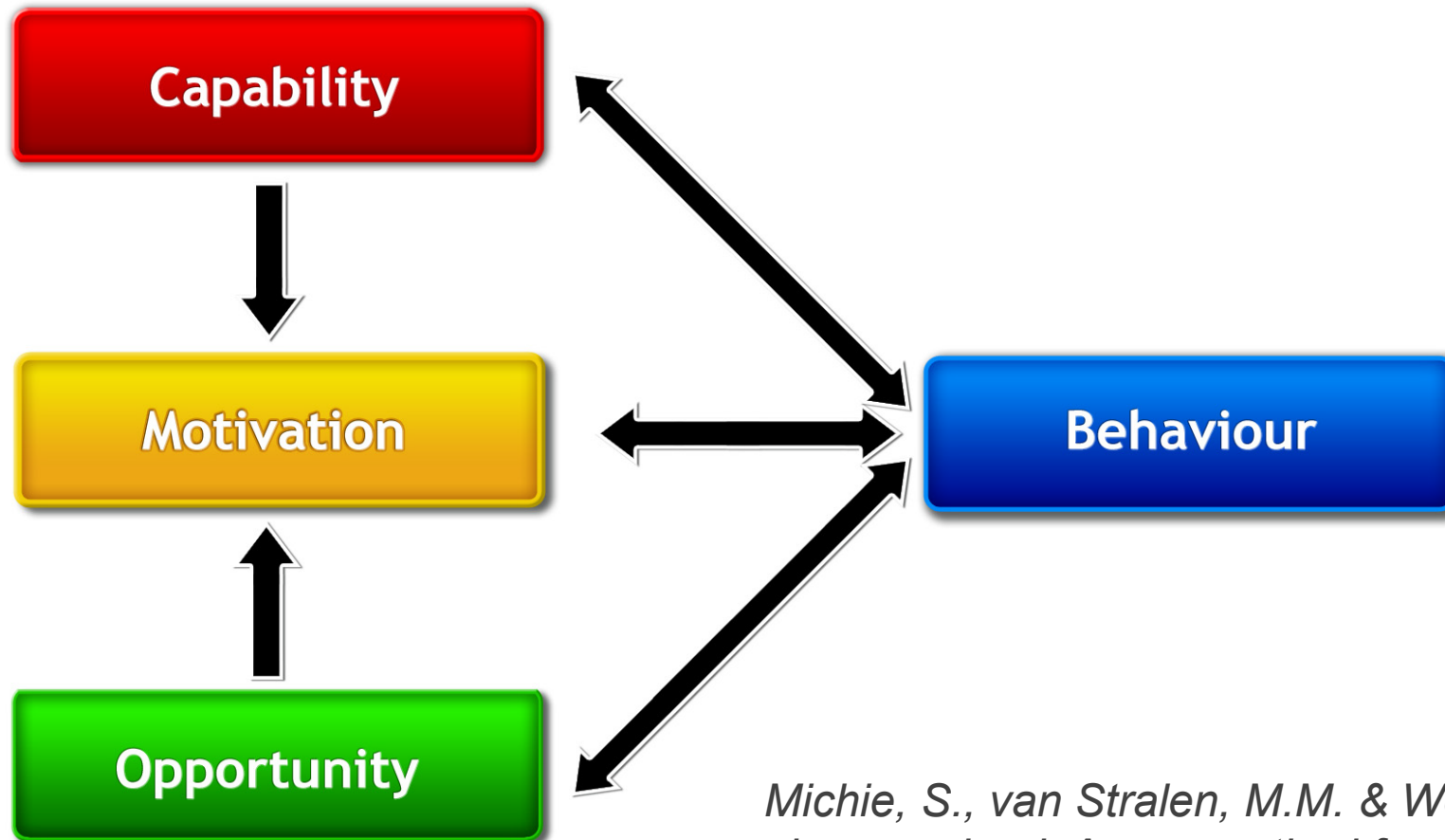
Counted # responses
across 9 items

- Found legal requirements about OHS
- Found info on protecting employees
- Made OHS rules
- Talked with employees about OHS
- Gave OHS training to all employees
- Wrote an OHS policy & shared it
- Made fire emergency plans & shared them
- Appointed employee with 1st aid training
- Systematically ID'd all hazards

% businesses by # of OHS management actions done

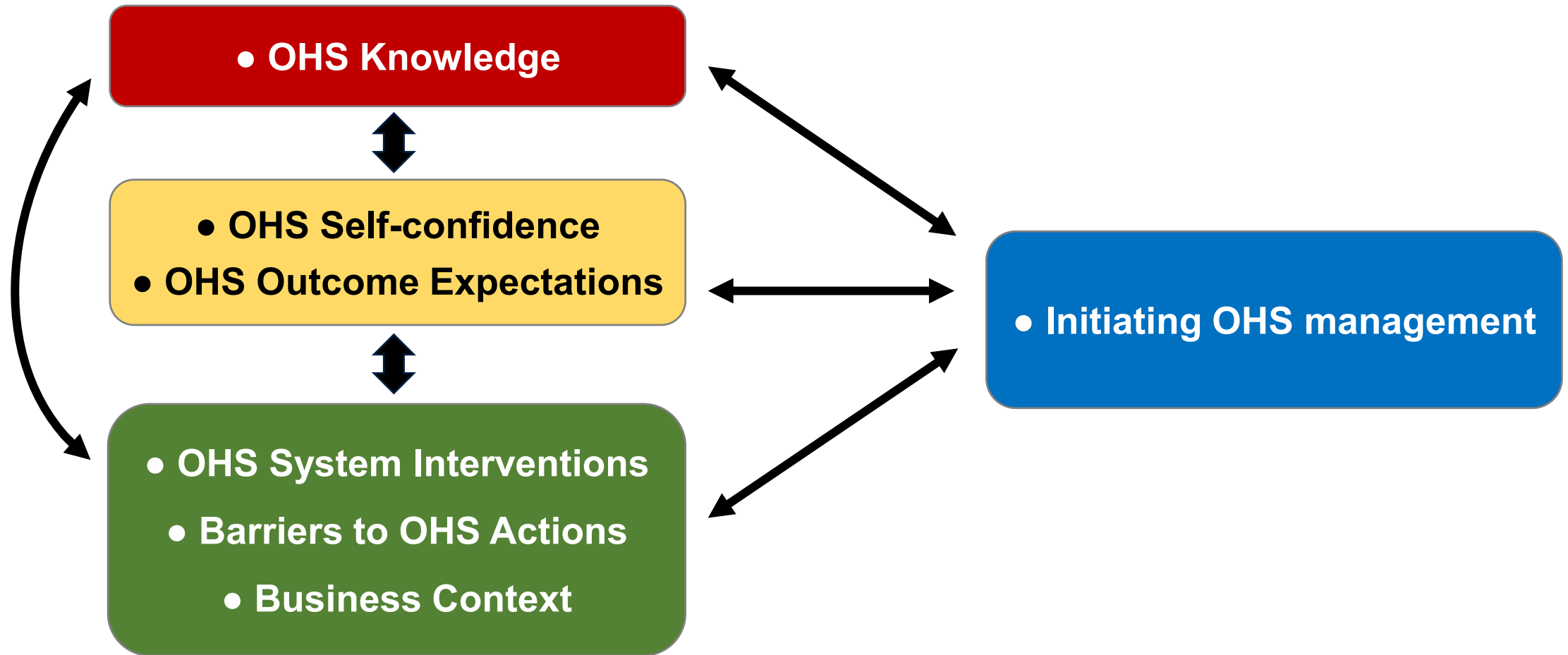


COM-B System: a framework for understanding behaviour



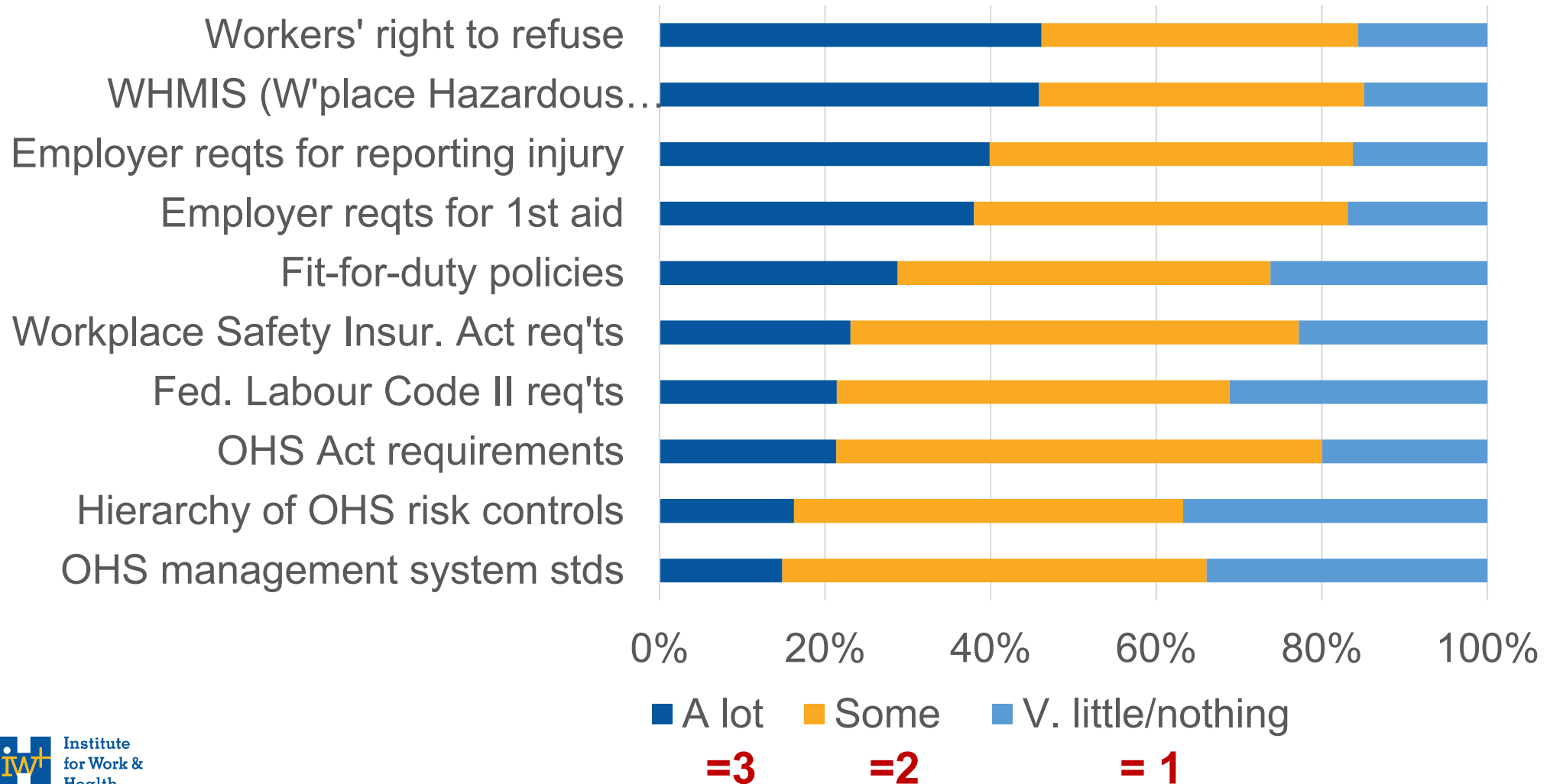
Michie, S., van Stralen, M.M. & West, R. The behaviour change wheel: A new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions. Implementation Sci 6, 42 (2011).

Primary factors of interest in the study



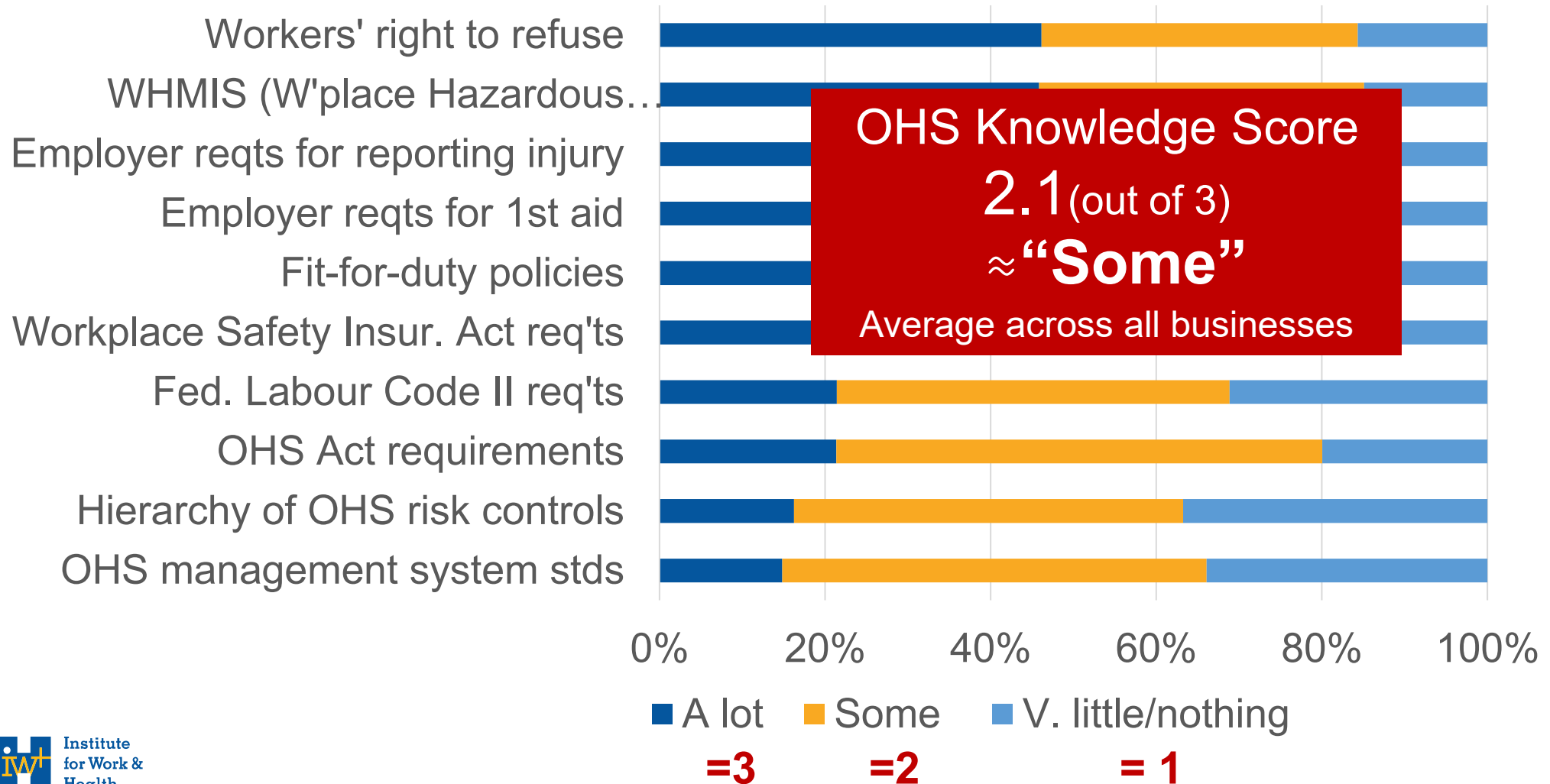
Owner/manager self-rated knowledge about OHS topics

“Please indicate how much you know about the following topics.”

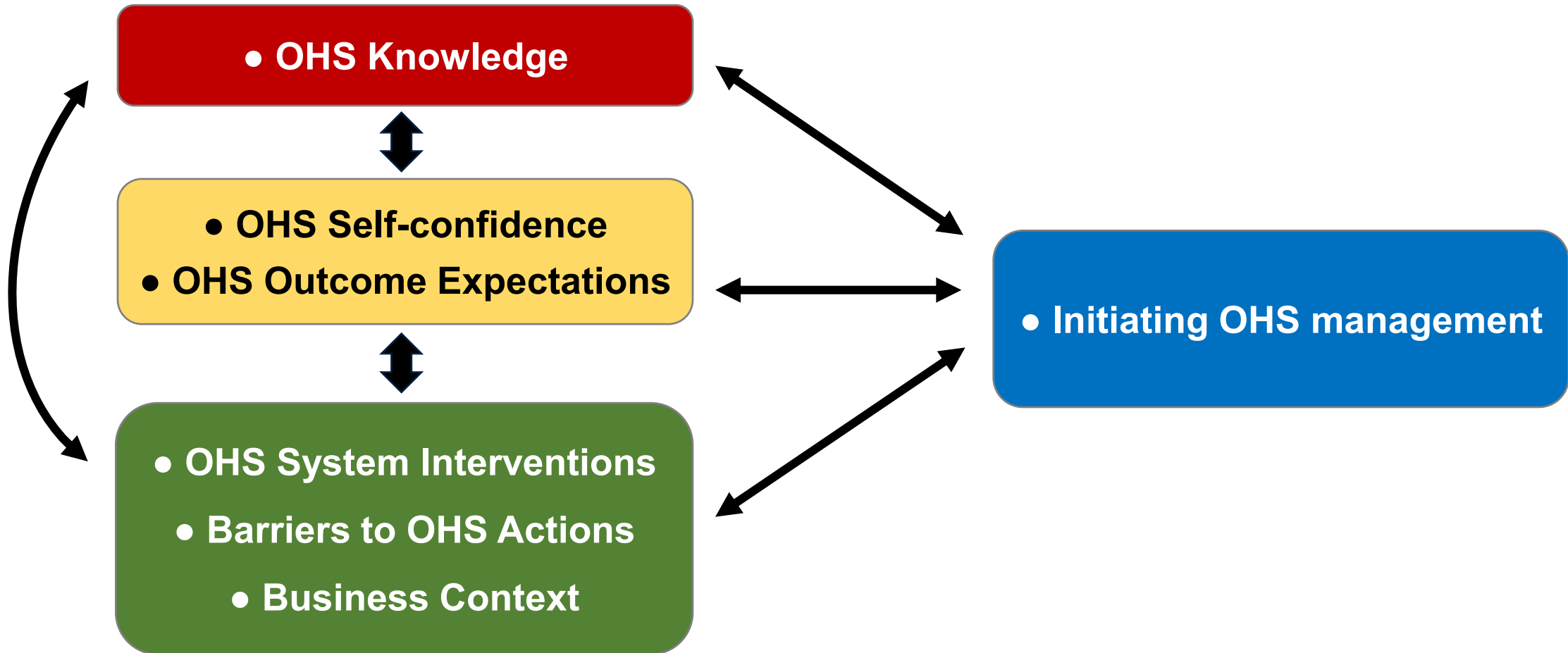


Owner/manager self-rated knowledge about OHS topics

“Please indicate how much you know about the following topics.”



Factors of interest in the study



OHS self-confidence (self-efficacy) and OHS outcome expectations measures

• OHS Self-confidence

Average score = 3.0
= **“Confident”**

• OHS Outcome Expectations

Average score = 3.8
≈ **“Likely”**

- Considering the following activities, how confident are you that you can do them when needed? (5 activities)
 - Not at all confident = 1
 - Somewhat confident = 2
 - Confident = 3
 - Very confident = 4
- How likely are the following to happen if your business has good practices in workplace safety and health? (4 outcomes)
 - Extremely unlikely = 1
 - Unlikely = 2
 - Possible = 3
 - Likely = 4
 - Very likely = 5

OHS opportunities, barriers and context measures

• OHS System Interventions

- Ever used info./services from MLITSD, HSAs and/or WSIB (avg. 1.5 of possible 3)
- Ever visited by MLITSD inspector (11% of businesses)

• Barriers to OHS Actions

- # reasons for not taking action on OHS (avg. 0.8 of possible 7)

• Business Context

- Industrial sector (32% goods-producing)
- Hazardous exposures (48% of businesses)
- Number of full-time employees (avg. 2.1)
- Time since registration (avg. 24 mos.)

Statistical significance of the relationship of each measure and OHS management initiation

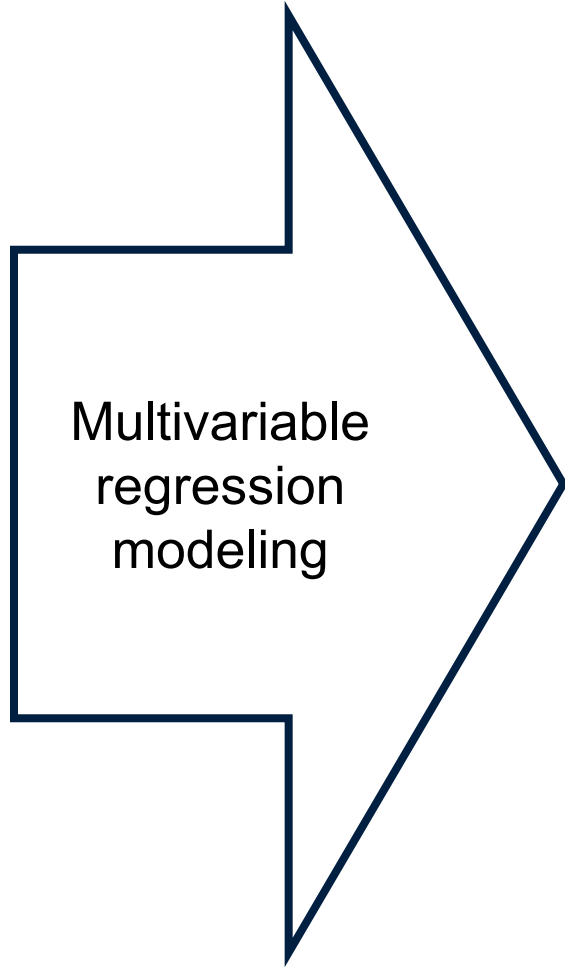
Measure	Statistical significance
OHS knowledge	***
OHS self-confidence	***
OHS outcome expectations	***
Use of public OHS info/services	***
OHS inspector visit	**
Barriers to OHS actions	*
Industrial sector	*
Hazardous exposures	*
# FT employees	ns (p = 0.14)
Time since registration	ns (p = 0.98)

***, $p < 0.001$
 **, $p < 0.01$
 *, $p < 0.05$
 ns, not statistically significant

Result of Wilcoxon rank-sum or Pearson Chi-square statistical tests.

Putting all factors together in one model

Measure	Statistical significance
OHS knowledge	***
OHS self-confidence	***
OHS outcome expectations	***
Use of public OHS info/services	***
OHS inspector visit	**
Barriers to OHS actions	*
Industrial sector	*
Hazardous exposures	*
# FT employees	ns
Time since registration	ns



• OHS Knowledge ***

• OHS Self-confidence ***

***, $p < 0.001$

Robust Poisson regression model:
 $R^2_{\text{marg}} = 0.29$

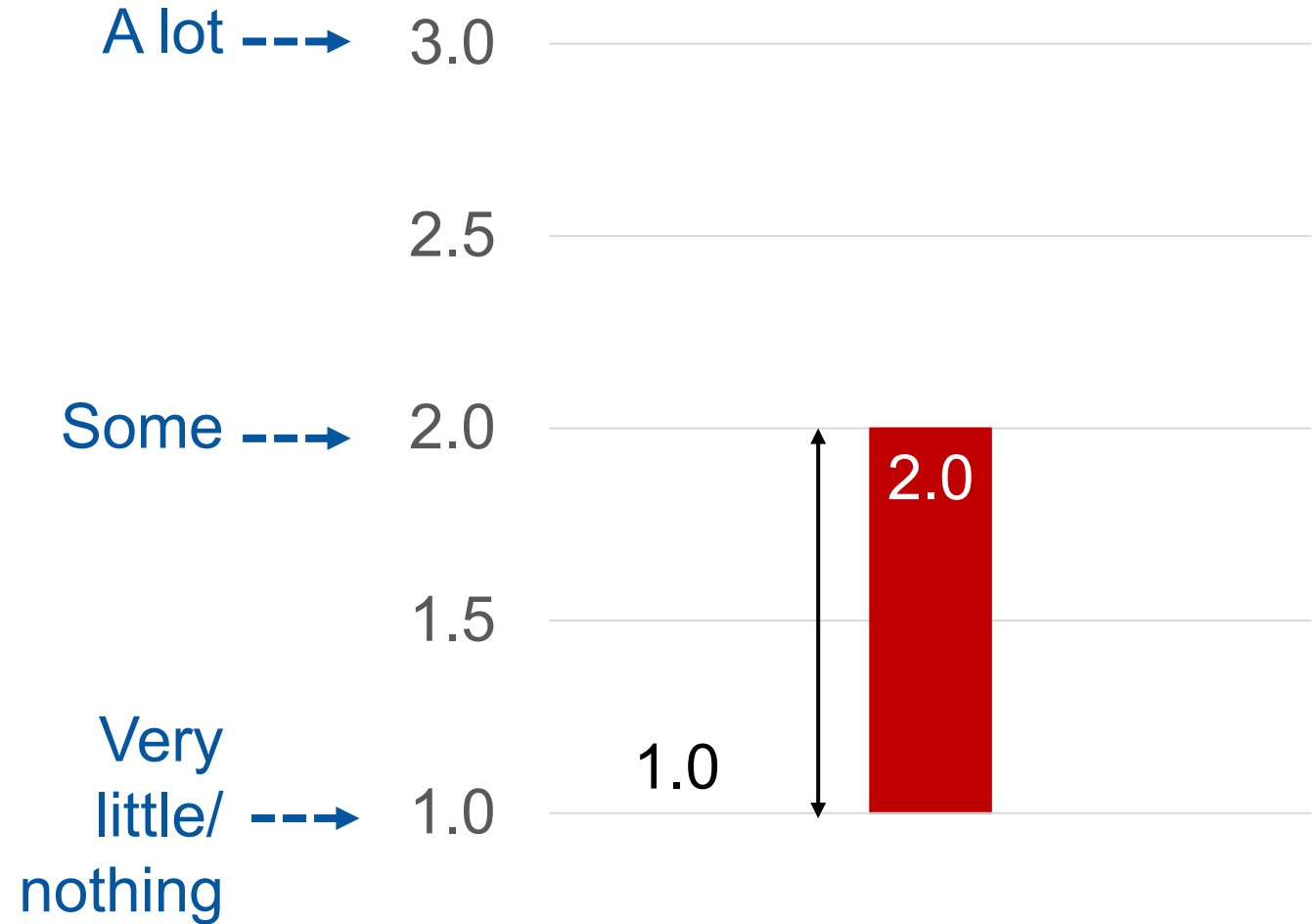
Estimated “effect” of OHS knowledge (from model)

- OHS Knowledge Score

Increase of 1 unit knowledge score



OHS management initiation is **48%** more prevalent



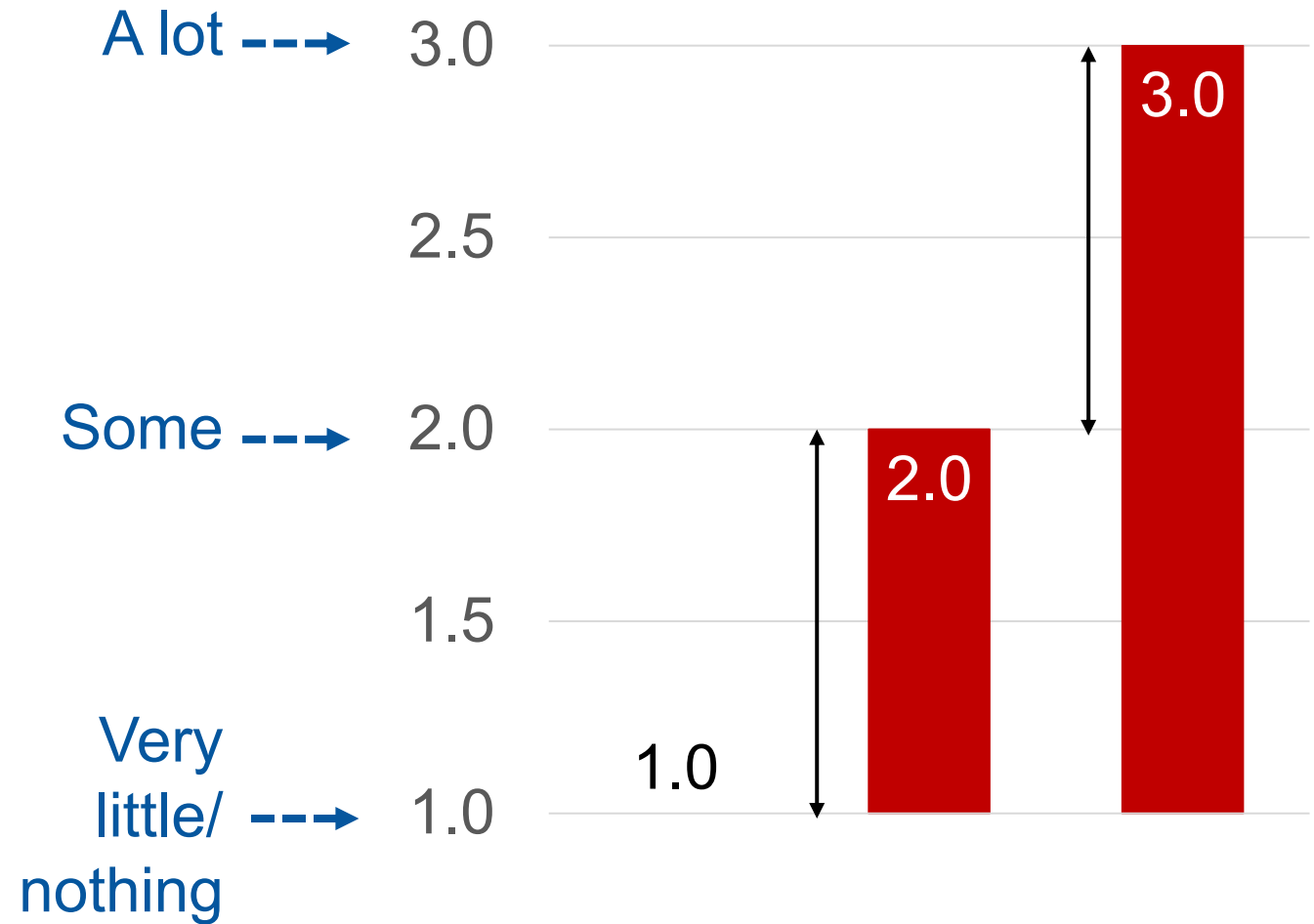
Estimated “effect” of OHS knowledge (from model)

• OHS Knowledge Score

Increase of **1 unit** knowledge score



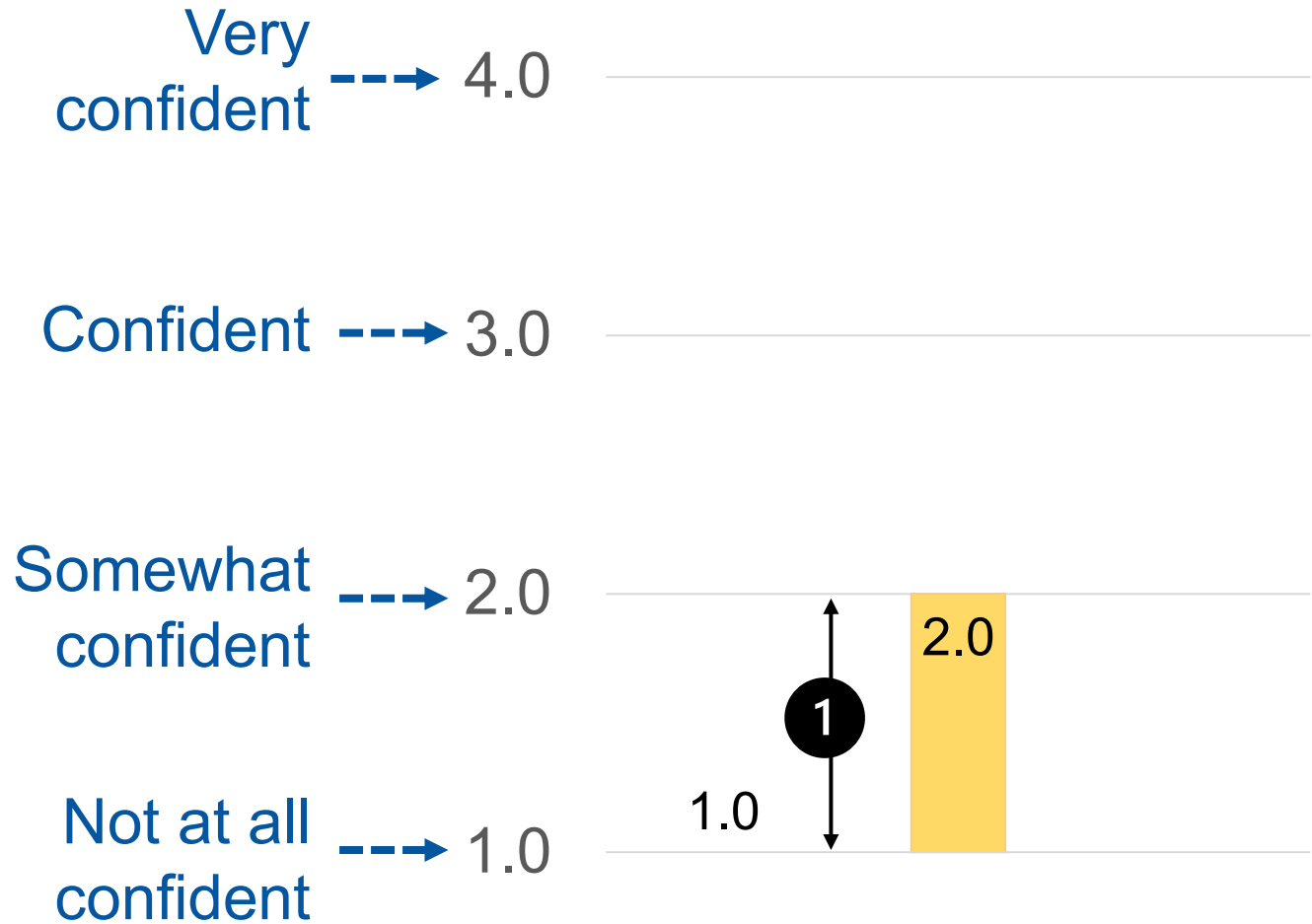
OHS management initiation is **48%** more prevalent



Estimated “effect” of OHS self-confidence (from model)

• OHS Self-confidence Score

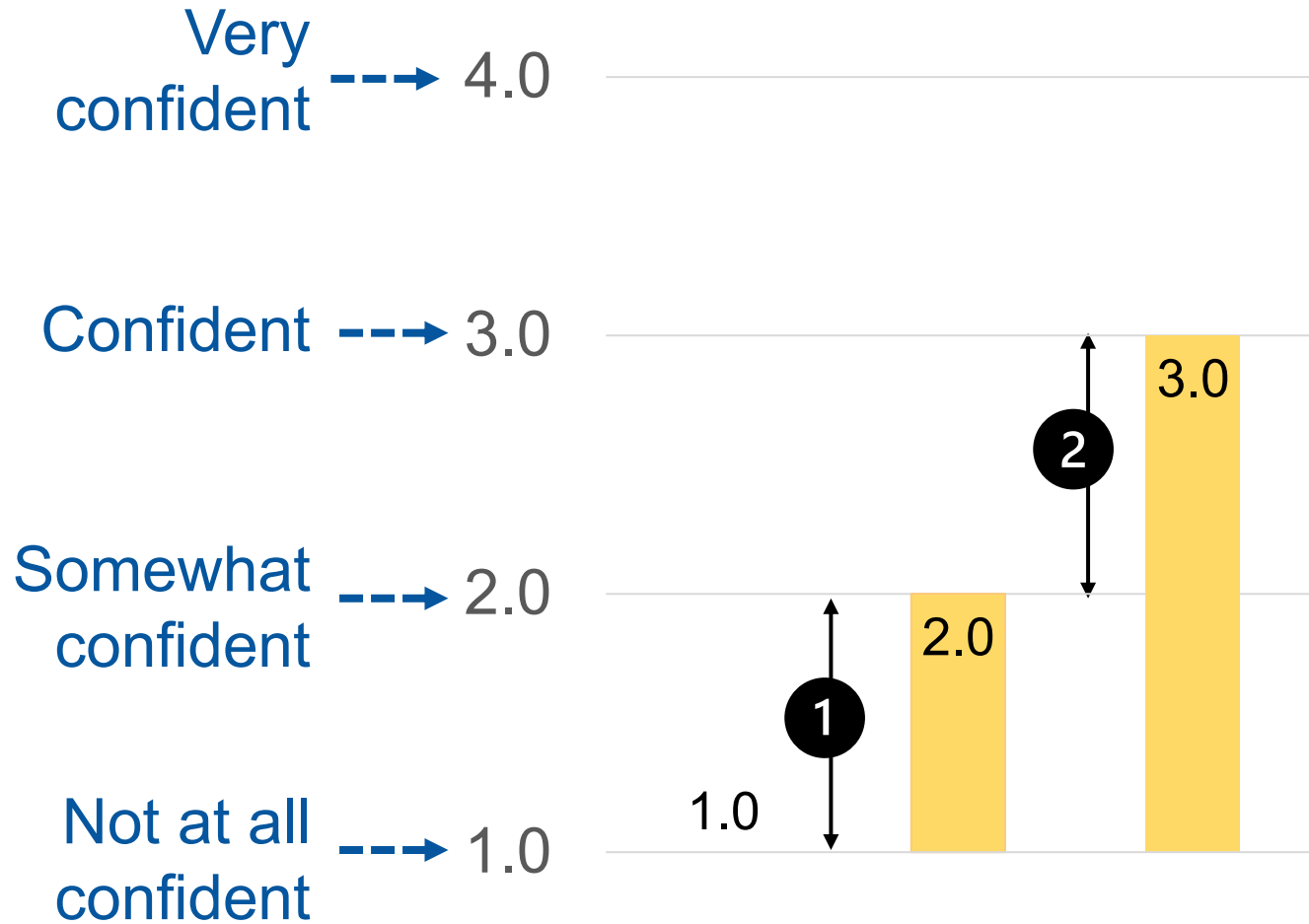
- 1 Increase from 1.0 to 2.0 self-confidence score
→
OHS mgmt. initiation is **4 times** more prevalent



Estimated “effect” of OHS self-confidence (from model)

• OHS Self-confidence Score

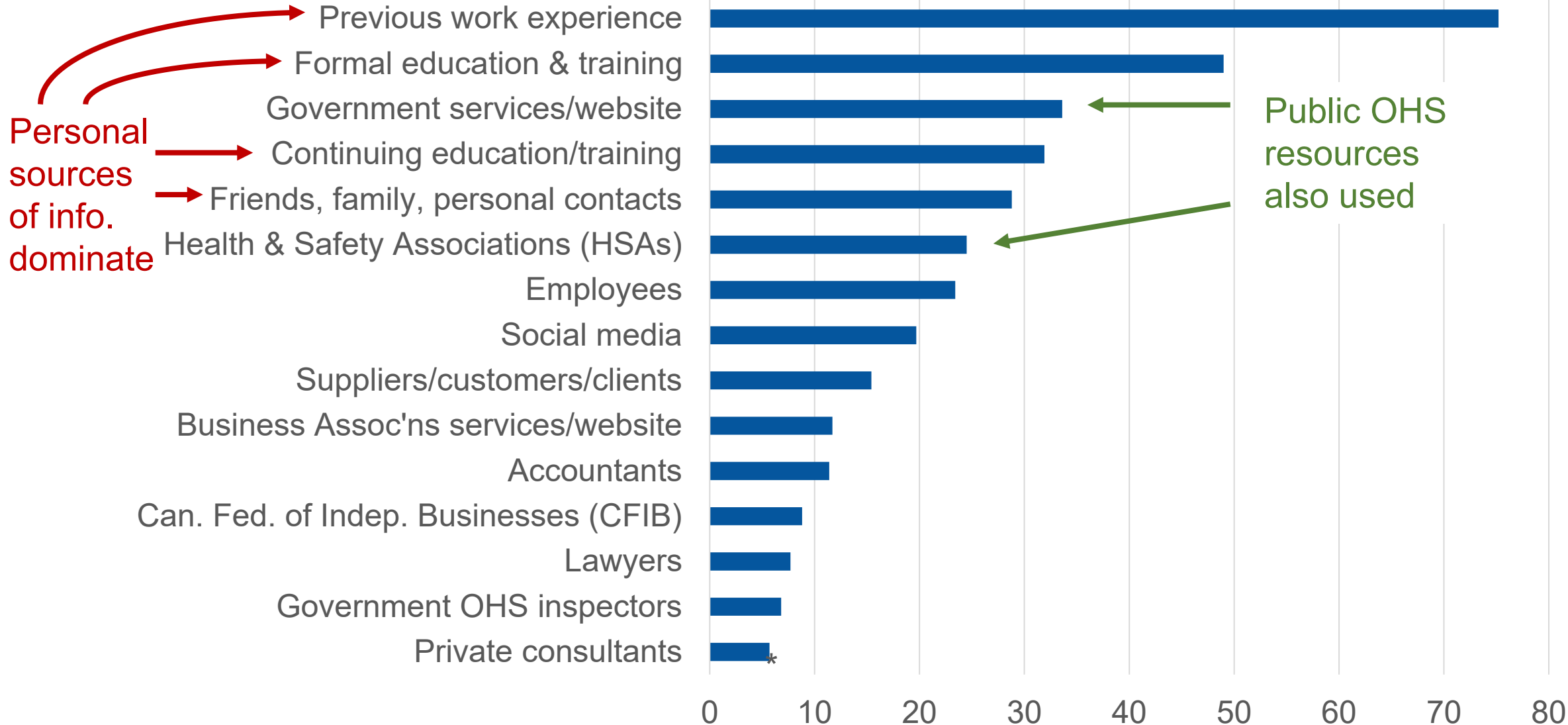
- 1 Increase from 1.0 to 2.0 self-confidence score
→
OHS mgmt. initiation is **4 times** more prevalent
- 2 Increase from 2.0 to 3.0 self-confidence score
→
OHS mgmt. initiation is **2 times** more prevalent



Recap

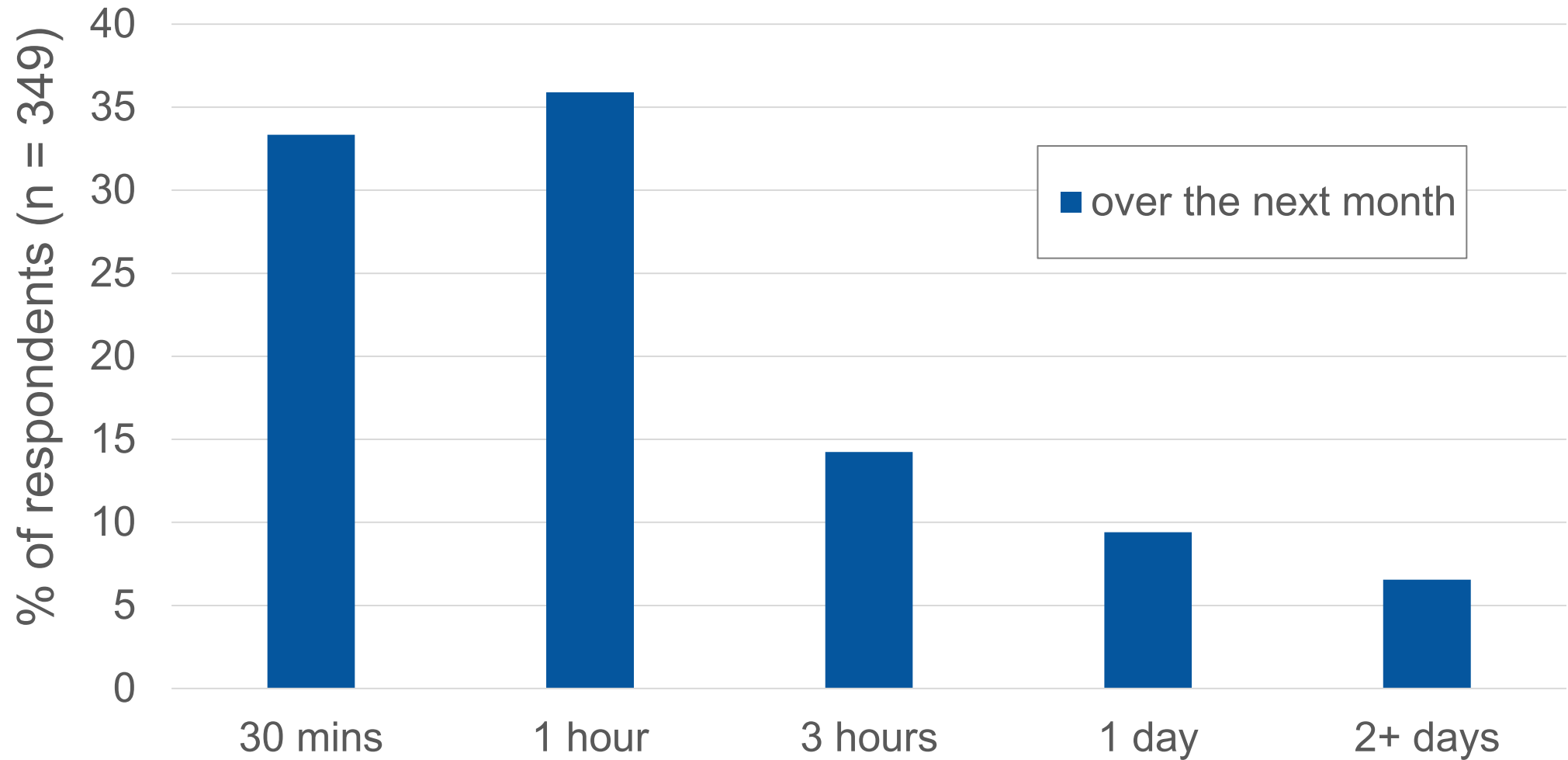
- Evidence of a lack of basic OHS management in some new businesses with employees (36% of study sample)
 - Even in the presence of hazardous exposures
- Evidence that OHS knowledge and OHS self-confidence have important associations with the initiation of OHS management
- From research, we know knowledge and self-confidence can be enhanced through education and training (Kraiger et al. 1993)

Info. Sources “Definitely Helpful” for them Taking OHS Action: % Businesses

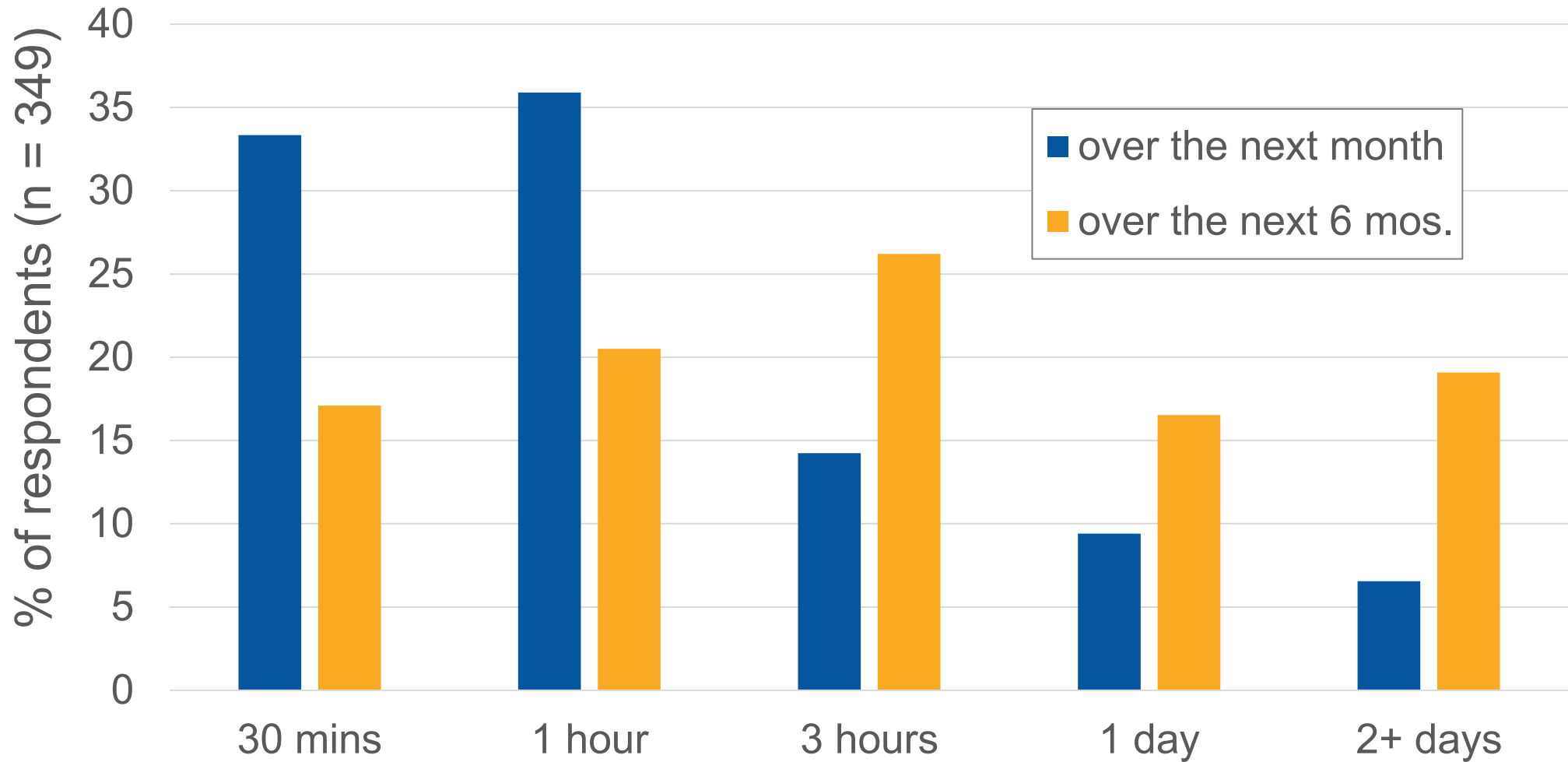


Potential interventions

Time available for free online OHS course

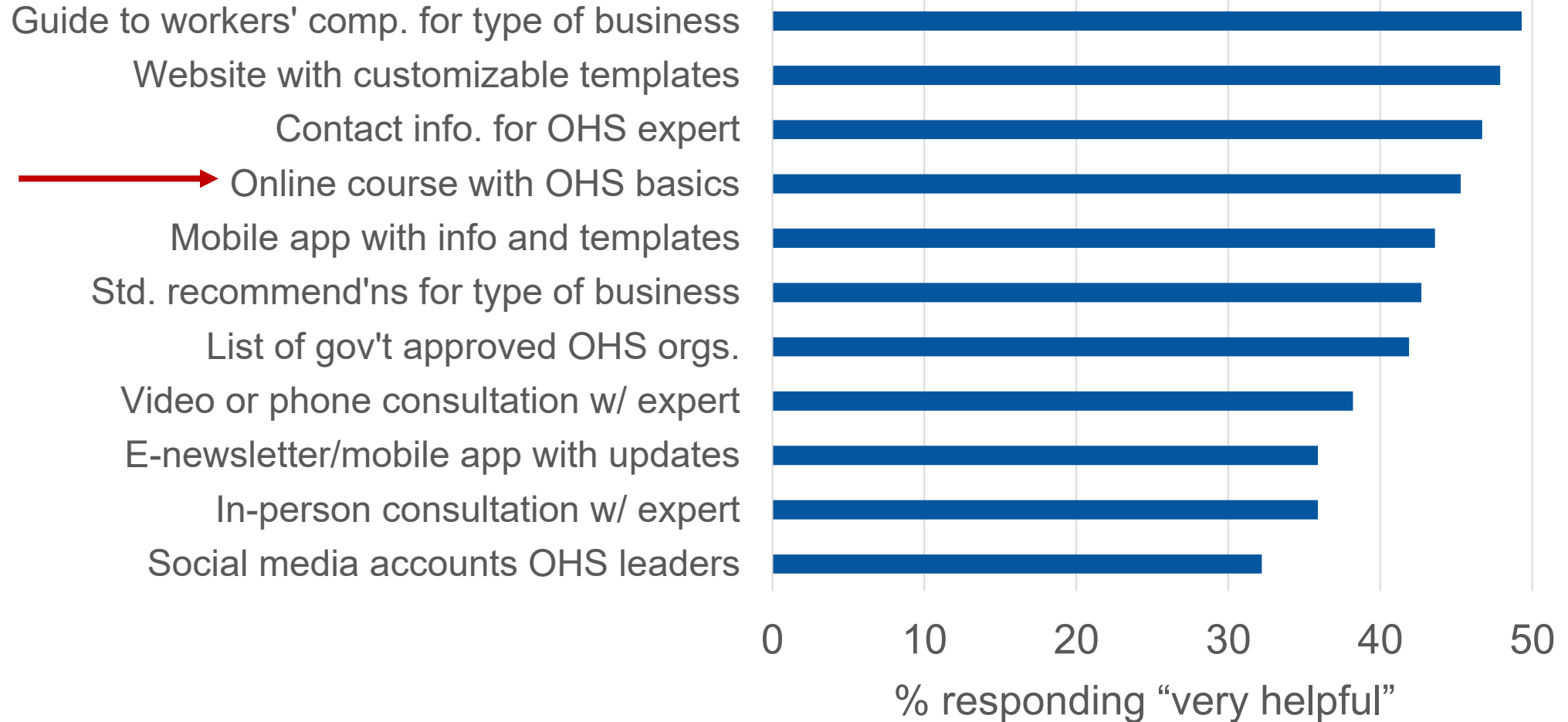


Time available for free online OHS course

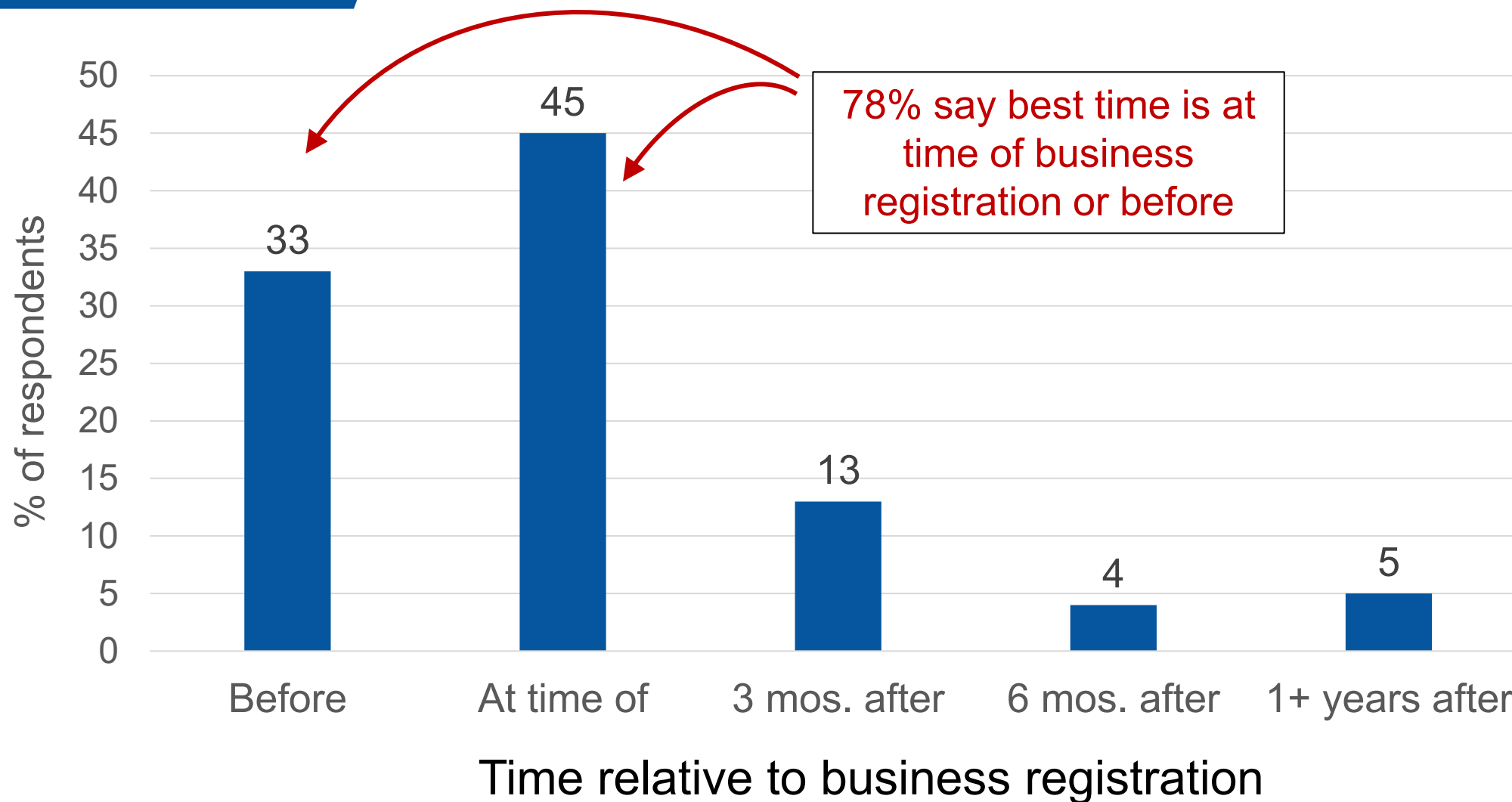


% responding “very helpful” to resource suggestions

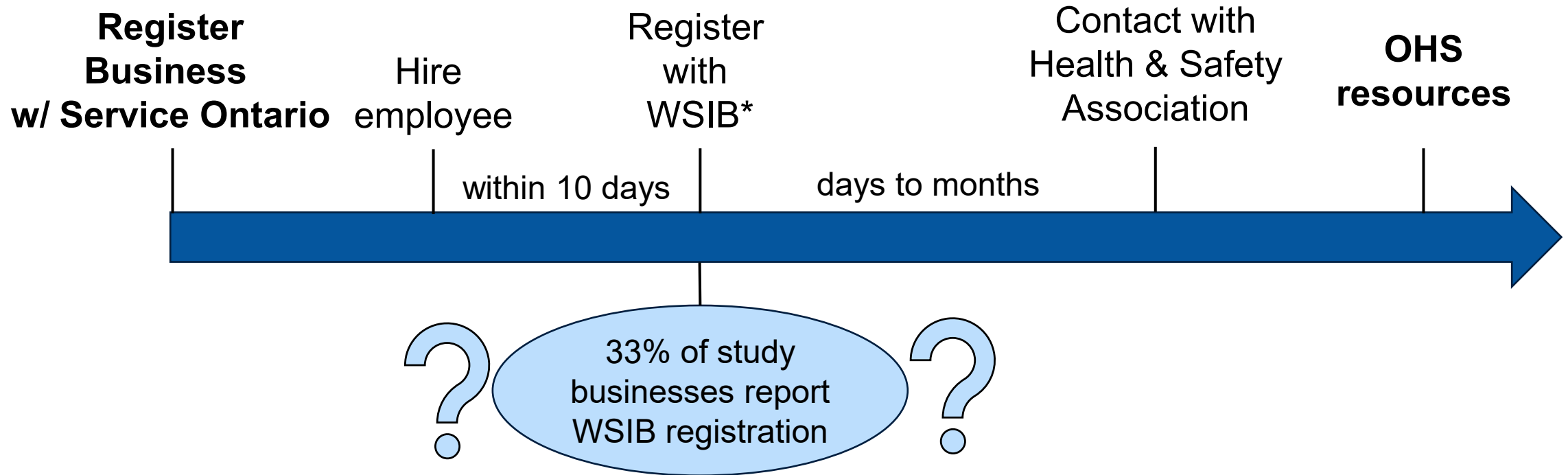
“How helpful would the following **resources** be to you as you start up your business?”



Best time to learn about OHS resources relative to time of business registration



Sequence of events in Ontario currently



* WSIB, Workplace Safety & Insurance Board

Discussion & Conclusions

- Evidence of a lack of basic OHS management in some new businesses with employees (36% of study sample)
- Evidence that OHS knowledge and OHS self-confidence have important associations with the initiation of OHS management
- From research, we know OHS knowledge and OHS self-confidence can be enhanced through education and training
- New businesses show a preference for OHS resources at time of business registration
- Might we increase the opportunity for new businesses (with employees) to be exposed to OHS resources in a more timely way?

Limitations

- Sample not representative
 - excluded 1/3 of businesses, which were from lower harm sectors
 - low response rate
- Cross-sectional survey
 - association \neq causation
 - limited insight into steps in the process of initiating OHS management
- May not have measured everything that is important

Strengths

- Innovative sampling frame – Business Registry
- Addresses a research gap - OHS in new businesses
- Good number and diversity of businesses
- Guided by a theoretically based conceptual framework
- Potential policy relevance

Questions? Comments?



Thank you

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This project was funded by a grant provided by the WorkSafe Ontario Fund. The provision of grant funding by the WorkSafe Ontario Fund does not imply endorsement of the content.

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