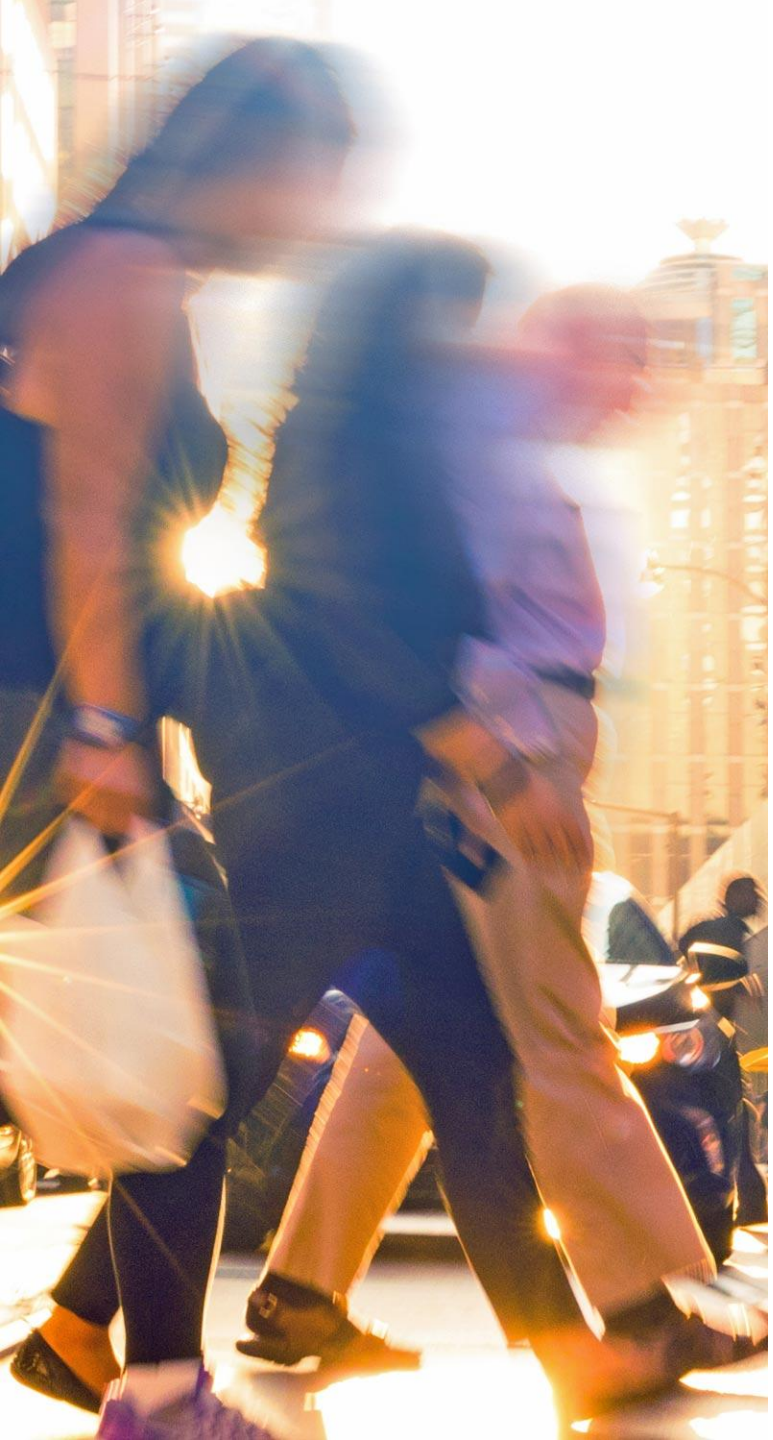

New business owners on why and how OHS starts to matter

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Acknowledgements

IWH Research Team

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Project advisory committee

- **Business community**
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- **Occupational health and safety (OHS) agencies**
  - Workplace Safety & Insurance Board (WSIB)
  - Infrastructure Health & Safety Association (IHSA)
  - Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers (OHCOW)
  - Workplace Safety North (WSN)
  - Workplace Safety & Prevention Services (WSPS)

Key messages

- The business is the extension of the owner. Owner's knowledge and approaches impact safety.
- Employment relationships influence safety approaches (potential employment misclassifications).
- Information received from informal networks and personal experience is as good as the source of the information.

Study background

Why focus on new businesses?

- 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)*
- Research gap regarding new businesses and occupational health and safety (OHS) *(Van Eerd et al., 2026*)*

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

Interview focus & analysis

Interview focus:

- How do new business owners describe the initiation and the process of OHS management within their business?
- What are the factors associated with their initiation of OHS management?

Data analysis:

- Identify common threads and patterns across the interviews

Recruitment

Ontario Business Registry

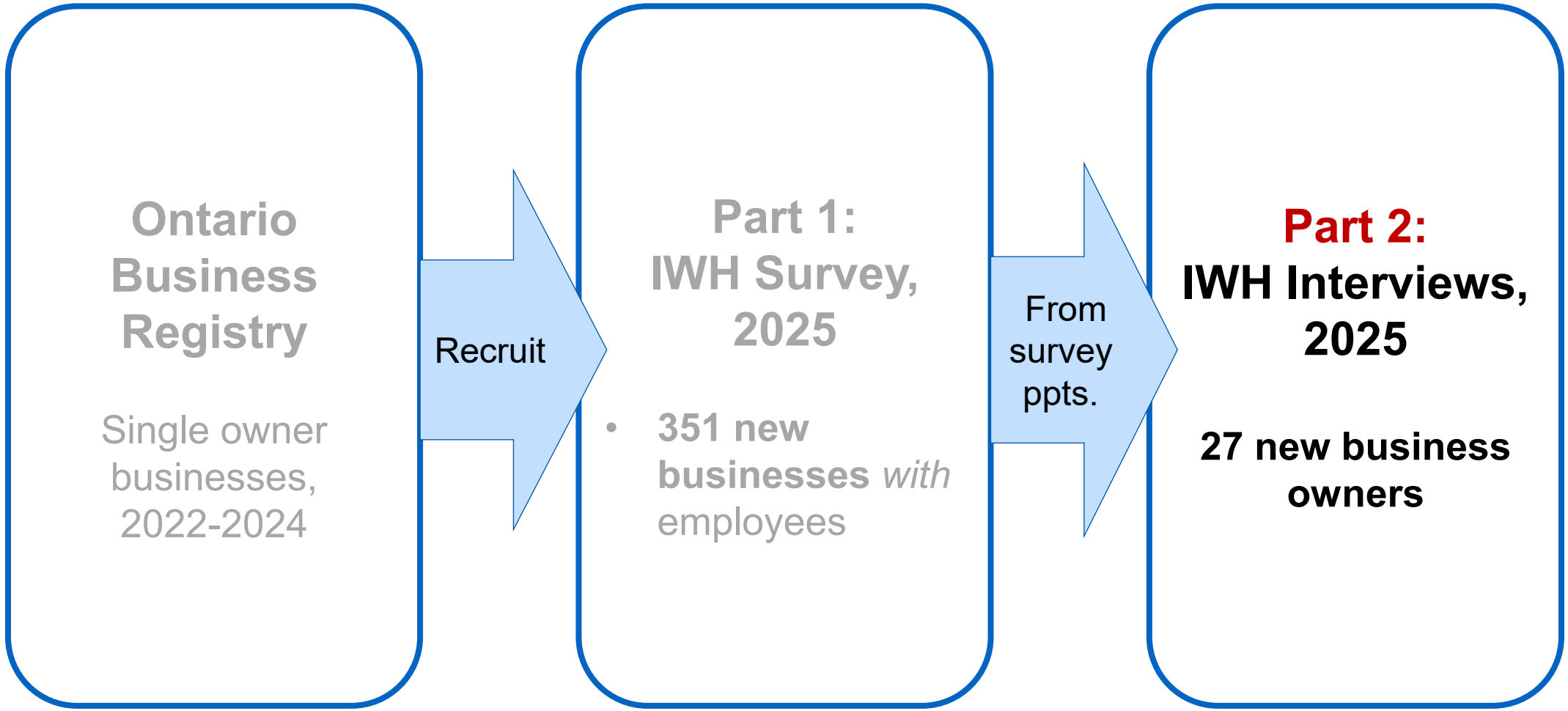
Single owner businesses, 2022-2024

Recruit

Part 1: IWH Survey, 2025

- **351 new businesses** *with* employees

Recruitment



Participant and business characteristics

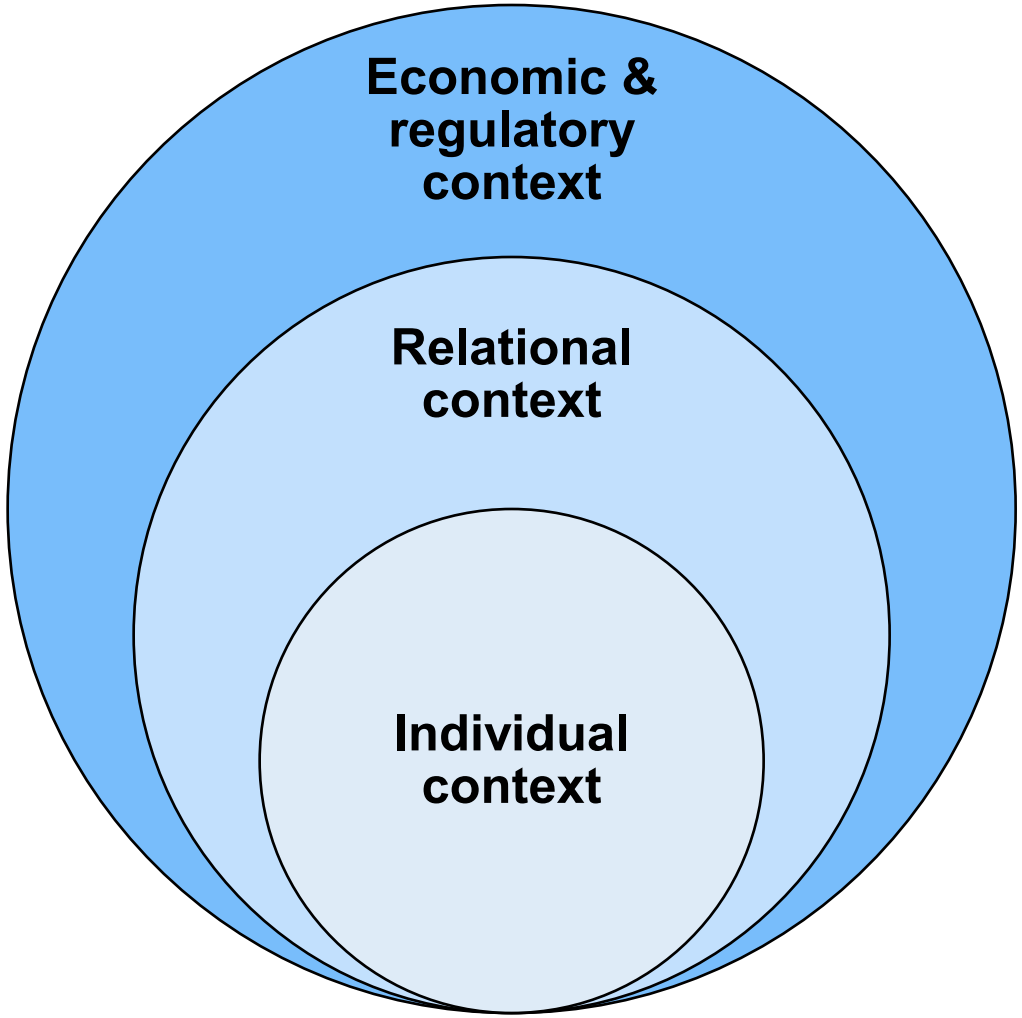
- **Gender**:
  - Women: 12
  - Men: 15
- **Sector**:
  - Trades and skilled work: 12
  - Services:15
- **Business age**: ~ 2.5 years
- **Prior experience in the current industry**:
  - Yes: 12
  - No: 15
- **Mix of employment arrangements**
- **Size:**
  - No staff on payroll: 13
  - < 5 staff: 10
  - ≥ 5 staff: 4

What are the factors associated with the initiation of OHS management?

Core narrative

“The business is me.”

Organizing concepts



Individual context

Owner-level factors shape how OHS starts and evolves.

- Personal OHS experiences and knowledge

> *"We had a health and safety meeting, like, every day [working at my previous job in the mining industry] [...]* ***So, I was very familiar with [safety]. And because I was at it for so long, a lot of those things are kind of ingrained in me.*** *So, even for me going to, let's say, suppliers and that kind of thing, or [...] where the boxes are involved, you know, lift with your legs and not your [back], you know. These sorts of rules that you learn along the way." (P3, Retail trade)*

Individual context

Owner-level factors shape how OHS starts and evolves.

- Personal OHS experiences and knowledge
- Personal ethos on safety

> *"**I feel it's an employer's responsibility to make sure it's there and to make sure that employees do have access to it or, and do know**. And I know that's commonplace in big corporations, but might not be for small businesses. And they might not even truly think about, **hey, I have that toilet bowl cleaner for my toilet. Do I need an MSDS sheet for it? Well, yeah, you should**." (P9, Gift, novelty and souvenir retailer)*

Individual context

Owner-level factors shape how OHS starts and evolves.

- Personal OHS experiences and knowledge
- Personal ethos on safety
- Personal health and wellbeing

> *"I say that there's no room for slack, because at the end of the day,* ***when you're in business for yourself, if you put yourself in harm's way, how are you going to pay your bills?*** *So you want, you want to be extra, it's better to be a little extra cautious than it is to be slacking at something." (P20, Building finishing)*

Relational context

Relationships triggers safety practices.

- Employment relationships

> *“because in Ontario, there's one of the regulations said that, especially if you're taking a training, something they ask that,* ***who are most at risk? The new people or the people who have experience?*** *So, that's why I say anything can happen. It doesn't matter if you have experience or don't have, but* ***most of it happens for people who doesn't have experience****. And then that's why* ***we always focus for them because they don't know. But if you have experience, I mean, you will know, oh, okay, now I have experience. I've been teached how to use that****. Yeah. And it does not affect me than the person who doesn't have experience.” (P7, Janitorial services)*

Relational context

Relationships triggers safety practices.

- Employment relationships

> *"**I require my sole proprietors to have their own [liability insurance].** But I also know that **if I wanted to hire them on as employees, I could pay for my independent contractors' WSIB.** […] If they weren't able to do it for themselves. I really think that being protected is important. And I had someone who wasn't willing to do it for themselves, so I had to figure that out." (P11, Landscaping services)*

Relational context

Relationships triggers safety practices.

- Employment relationships
- Network of peers, partners, clients/customers, community

> "***What's helped me the most is talking with other people who've potentially dealt with certain situations*** *where they're like, hey, by the way, make sure you do this or don't do this because…[…] other business owners. I guess the common things that come up if somebody gets hurt, or somebody comes into work, you don't need them and you send them home, having to make sure you pay them at least the three hours, those kinds of things."(P4, Pet care services)*

Relational context

Relationships triggers safety practices.

- Employment relationships
- Network of peers, partners, clients/customers, community
- Family as workers; home as workplace

> *"**It just became overwhelming for me at my house**; the storage space was taking up my basement […] There was just **too many boxes and too many products sitting around the house that became problematic**." (P18, Retail trade)*

Economic, sectoral, and regulatory context

Economic and regulatory conditions influence OHS initiation.

- Economic pressures and challenges
- Regulatory requirements, trainings, and interactions with regulatory bodies

> *"[**work health safety course we had to do], they had given us some guidelines to give to employees when we hired them**. So, we printed off that. Bad of me to say, but I didn't necessarily read them as well as I should […] when you're running a business, there's just so many things to do […] And I feel like sometimes that was just falling to the bottom […] It might have actually only been in the spring of 2021 that we did that worker safety thing. **When we knew that, I think it was a requirement maybe to get the permit for the ice cream truck** […] I probably should have done more research on that […] taken more time to go on the WSIB and spending more time figuring out what I actually needed to do." (P5, Mobile food business)*

Mental health and wellbeing of new business owners

Mental health and wellbeing of new business owners

New business pressures impact owner's mental health and overall wellbeing.

- Sole responsibility of owning a business, extreme work hours, blurred boundaries between work and personal life

> *"**In that first year of getting things sort of figured out, every other day, there was something I had to [figure out]** […] And it was so stressful and so upsetting [...] I really beat myself up if I feel foolish. **And being in a small business, you're basically on display for everybody.** And every time you make a mistake, you feel it's magnified tenfold [..] I was having sort of dissociative moments where I'd just be staring into the void. I was eating lunch and staring. **I couldn't even process what to do next. I just couldn't pull myself out of that."** (P13, Catering business)*

Mental health and wellbeing of new business owners

New business pressures impact owner's mental health and overall wellbeing.

- Sole responsibility of owning a business, extreme work hours, blurred boundaries between work and personal life
- Business pressures manifest physically

> *I started getting one job per month and started to get two, three jobs every two weeks. I recall somewhere around [the end of September],* ***I remember I had this whole month where every single day was scheduled. So, it was very stressful in the beginning because I had a lot of challenges.*** *I remember that week, the inspector called me out. I recall having a problem with payments.* ***It was too stressful a week, to the point that I got sick."*** *(P15, Small residential projects)*

Mental health and wellbeing of new business owners

New business pressures impact owner's mental health and overall wellbeing

- Sole responsibility of owning a business, extreme work hours, blurred boundaries between work and personal life
- Business pressures manifest physically
- Personal coping strategies and focus on resilience

> *"**Just embrace the suck**, that's what my mentor says. It sucks. It's going to be busy. But, you **just have to embrace that**. Take it for what it is. And know that all those hours you put in, **you kind of come out better on the other side financially.**" (P26, Car washing business)*

Mental health and wellbeing of new business owners

New business pressures impact owner's mental health and overall wellbeing

- Sole responsibility of owning a business, extreme work hours, blurred boundaries between work and personal life
- Business pressures manifest physically
- Personal coping strategies
- Lack of professional mental health support

Key Messages

- The business is the extension of the owner. Owner's knowledge and approaches impact safety.
- Employment relationships influence safety approaches (potential employment misclassifications).
- Information received from informal networks and personal experience is as good as the source of the information.

Suggestions for consideration

For policymakers:

- Provide OHS information to new businesses early on.
- Recognize new/small business owners as a target group for mental health resources.

For new business owners:

- Seek OHS resources before hiring first employee.
- Consider employee health and safety in business planning.

Thank you

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