

Health and Safety Programs

Small and Micro Businesses - Introduction to Health and Safety

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What is considered to be a small and micro business?

A small business is generally defined as an organization with fewer than 100 employees, while a micro business has less than 10 employees. The specific definition may vary by industry and jurisdiction. This OSH Answers fact sheet is aimed at businesses with less than 20 employees; however, any business owner may benefit from this information.

Small businesses are critical for the economy and the communities they serve. They create jobs and offer flexibility in decision-making while often offering stronger customer relationships. However, small businesses may also have limited resources compared to larger organizations, which can pose unique challenges in implementing health and safety programs.

Why is occupational health and safety important for small businesses?

Regardless of organizational size, ensuring strong workplace health and safety practices is the right thing to do. For small businesses, prioritizing health and safety is essential to preventing injuries and illnesses while also driving long-term success. A strong safety culture protects workers, reduces costs, improves productivity, and ensures compliance with legal requirements.

Investing in workplace health and safety provides several benefits, including:

- Reducing workplace injuries and illnesses.
- Enhancing worker morale, retention, and productivity.
- Lowering absenteeism, presenteeism, and turnover.
- Reducing costs related to workers' compensation, hiring, and training.
- Minimizing legal liabilities and regulatory fines.
- Strengthening business reputation and client trust.

Health and safety go beyond identifying and addressing physical hazards. A healthy and safe workplace prioritizes both physical and psychological protection, creating a work environment where employees feel secure, supported, and engaged.

How do small and micro businesses promote health and safety?

A positive health and safety culture starts at the top. Employers should lead by example and consistently demonstrate safe work practices while reinforcing the importance of safety in daily operations. Employers should also create an environment where feedback is valued and encourage open communication for workers to report hazards and share safety concerns.

In addition, a key part of an effective safety culture is the [internal responsibility system](#), which is the underlying philosophy of health and safety legislation across Canada. Its foundation is that everyone in the workplace – both employers and workers – shares responsibility for maintaining a safe and healthy environment. When all levels of an organization are actively engaged in health and safety, risks are identified and addressed more effectively.

What are the key health and safety responsibilities of small and micro business owners?

Small and micro business owners are responsible for taking every precaution reasonable in the circumstances to protect the health and safety of their workers. This duty is fulfilled by:

- Identifying workplace hazards and implementing control measures.
- Complying with occupational health and safety laws and regulations.
- Establishing safe work procedures.
- Providing a workplace free of harassment or violence.
- Providing appropriate training and supervision for workers.
- Encouraging a safety culture within the organization.
- Making sure workers have the necessary personal protective equipment (PPE).
- Reporting certain injuries, illnesses, and incidents to government authorities and workers' compensation boards.

Depending on how many workers are employed, additional responsibilities include:

- Creating a workplace health and safety program.
- Selecting a health and safety representative or forming a health and safety committee.
- Creating and posting workplace policies.

Where do business owners start?

Starting a business may feel overwhelming, even before adding all the health and safety considerations. A good place to start is to:

- Determine the [jurisdiction](#) of operation and the type of work the business conducts.
- [Review applicable Acts, regulations, and standards](#) that apply to the work.
- Review the duties and responsibilities of employers, supervisors, and workers under the applicable *Occupational Health and Safety Act*, including the right to know, the right to participate, and the right to refuse.
- Determine the size of your workforce. Jurisdictions specify different requirements based on the number of workers. For example, first aid requirements, health and safety representatives vs. committees, program requirements, etc., depend on the number of regularly employed workers.
- Determine whether specific training or certification is required for workers (e.g., fall protection, Red Seal). Note: some training must be provided by the employer. For example, employers have a responsibility to provide Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System ([WHMIS](#)) training specific to the hazardous products present at the workplace and workplace procedures.

- Select a health and safety representative or create a [health and safety committee](#) with at least one worker representative and one management representative.
- [Identify hazards](#) in the workplace:
 - Are hazardous products used or present?
 - Is there any work conducted at heights?
 - Is there any exposure to radiation?
 - What equipment is present?
 - Are workers driving on highways or roadways?
 - Is there any manual material handling required?
 - Are workers exposed to stressors or other mental health concerns?
- Complete a [risk assessment](#) and determine appropriate controls.
- Consider other legislation that may be applicable. For example, [employment standards](#) (including working hours, rest periods, and leave) and [human rights](#).
- Clarify maintenance responsibilities if the building is leased or owned.
- Register your business with the appropriate government authorities and [workers' compensation board](#).
- Understand the [reporting requirements](#) for workplace injuries or significant events. Under the legislation, look for specifics around critical or serious injuries or illnesses, or critical or serious events.
- Review the roles of [government authorities](#) in enforcement and workplace inspections.
- [Post required documents](#) and signage in the workplace. For example, some jurisdictions require the health and safety policy to be posted, a copy of the Act and regulations, names of first responders and health and safety committee members or representatives, etc.

Many jurisdictions offer small business health and safety checklists. These checklists can help you better understand the requirements of the applicable legislation and how they may apply to your business.

For more information, please see our other OSH Answers on [Health and Safety Legislation in Canada](#).

What should an occupational health and safety program include?

An occupational health and safety program should contain:

1. A health and safety [policy](#).
2. The role of workplace parties (e.g., worker, employer, committee member, etc.)
3. Worker orientation.
4. [Hazard identification](#), [risk assessment](#), and [hazard control measures](#).
5. Procedures for reporting and [investigating incidents](#).
6. Employee training and education.
7. [Emergency preparedness](#) and response plans.
8. Regular workplace [inspections](#).
9. Safe work procedures.
10. First aid procedures.
11. Health and safety promotion, including psychological health and the [prevention of harassment and violence](#).
12. A system for maintaining records and documentation.
13. Mechanisms for evaluation and continuous improvement.

For more information on developing a health and safety program, see [Health and Safety Program—General Elements](#).

For more information, please see our other OSH Answers on [Health and Safety Programs](#).

What other programs may be required?

Depending on the hazards identified, additional programs may be required. These programs will likely interact with the overall health and safety program but may exist independently.

Examples include:

- [Hearing conservation program](#)
- [Violence and harassment prevention program](#)
- [WHMIS worker education program](#)
- [Fall protection program](#)
- [Emergency response program](#)
- [Respiratory protection program](#)
- [Musculoskeletal disorder \(MSD\) prevention program](#)
- [Business continuity program](#)

- Preventive maintenance program
- [Confined space program](#)
- Hot work program
- Chemical management program
- [Hazardous energy control program](#) (e.g., [lockout/tagout](#))
- [Occupational health and hygiene program](#)
- Health and safety training program
- Thermal stress program (e.g., [hot](#) or [cold](#))

Note that some of these programs may be required by law depending on the type of work, the hazards present, or the number of workers. Always verify with the legislation if a specific program is required.

Should programs and policies be reviewed regularly?

Yes. Employers must conduct regular reviews of all programs, procedures, and policies. The frequency with which they need to be reviewed may be specified in the legislation. If not, the workplace can determine the frequency. For example, the employer must annually review the WHMIS worker education program. Similarly, a health and safety policy usually requires an annual review.

These reviews ensure that policies, procedures, and programs remain effective and compliant with evolving regulations. Employers should:

- Assess the effectiveness of controls.
 - Update policies based on new hazards or incidents.
 - Engage workers in policy feedback and revisions.
 - Conduct annual reviews, or reviews after significant incidents or changes to legislation.
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What are cost-effective ways to implement health and safety in small and micro businesses?

Even with limited budgets, there are affordable ways to establish and maintain a strong health and safety program.

Consider:

- Accessing free health and safety guidelines, checklists, and templates from government agencies such as CCOHS, provincial regulators, and health and safety agencies.
- Using industry association resources that provide assistance with good practices and training materials.
- Downloading free workplace posters and hazard alerts from regulatory bodies.
- Signing up for health and safety newsletters and safety bulletins.
- Using free or low-cost online safety courses from credible sources.
- Implementing peer-to-peer training and worker onboarding.
- Attending webinars and workshops offered by regulatory agencies or industry groups.
- Implementing digital checklists, hazard reporting apps, safety reminders, etc.
- Creating an internal shared drive or cloud-based system to store safety policies and training records.
- Encouraging workers to report hazards early and address them promptly.
- Recognizing and rewarding workers to improve engagement.
- Joining industry networks and safety groups to connect with other small businesses.

How can businesses prepare for workplace visits from external health and safety inspectors?

Inspectors from the government agency responsible for health and safety can happen at any time. Sometimes, they provide notice of the inspection and other times, there may be no to limited notice. You must comply with the inspection. The health and safety worker representative (or committee member) should be available to walk through the workplace with the inspector.

Before an inspection:

- Keep all safety policies, training records, incident reports, and workplace inspection checklists easily accessible.
- Assign a point of contact (e.g., manager or supervisor) to guide the inspector and provide requested documents.
- Ensure that required documentation (e.g., WHMIS labels and first aid certificates) is up to date.
- Maintain a written record of hazard assessments and corrective actions taken.
- Schedule internal safety inspections to identify and address potential hazards before an inspection.

- Use government-provided self-inspection checklists relevant to the workplace, if available.
- Ensure workers know their rights and responsibilities.
- Encourage workers to report hazards or safety concerns proactively and address these hazards promptly.
- Follow-up with workers to ensure safety measures are effective.
- Educate workers on common questions inspectors may ask, such as emergency procedures or the use of personal protective equipment.
- Ensure emergency exits, first aid stations, and fire extinguishers are easily accessible.
- Verify that all safety signs are in place, legible, and meet legal requirements.
- Maintain housekeeping and organization to minimize hazards and demonstrate proactive safety management.

During the inspection, be professional and cooperative:

- Greet the inspector professionally and provide requested documents promptly.
- Answer questions honestly but concisely, focusing on how your business complies with safety requirements.
- Correct identified hazards immediately where possible.
- Take notes on any recommendations or compliance orders and create an action plan to address them.

After the inspection:

- Comply with any orders received.
- Document any corrective actions taken and provide proof of compliance.
- Follow-up with the inspector, if required.
- Post the inspection report in an accessible location.

Where can business owners get more information?

Always visit the government websites and resources for the jurisdiction of operation. For more information, refer to the [Canadian Government Departments Responsible for Health and Safety](#). In addition, many provinces have OHS Guides or SafeWork programs that offer additional resources and training materials.

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