

Safety Challenges in Small Companies



Studies have shown that workplace injury and illness rates are often highest among the companies that are the smallest. These businesses may not have the structure and/or resources to properly address their safety issues. (Safety Smart can tell you about some costly safety mistakes small companies make. Not a subscriber to SafetySmart? Sign up for a free trial.)

The NIOSH Science Blog recently ran a creative piece on safety and small companies, drawing parallels between protecting yourself from bears and addressing safety issues in small businesses. It sounds weird but it works.

The blog notes that the US National Park Service provides the following safety information for people:

- Bears are active in the mornings and evenings, and mating season is in July.
- Black bears use hollow trees as dens.
- Most attacks come from bears who want to swipe a picnic basket.
- When you see a bear, keep your distance.
- When the bear sees you, don't run away—it's faster than you are.

So how does this advice help small businesses protect their workers? You can apply the common sense that underlies the bear safety tips to a small company's operations.

What's the mating season? Research your industry and find the times of the day and seasons of the year during which injuries are most likely to occur. You can then focus your safety efforts on those times. (For example, one study found that workplace fatalities are more common in the afternoon.)

Where's the den? Identify where risks are physically located, such as around machinery, in the warehouse, etc.

What's in your picnic basket? Determine the most common safety hazards in your industry or type of workplace. For example, if park visitors bear-proof their food, their likelihood of an attack drops precipitously. So if you address your own top safety hazards, the likelihood that workers will get injured by them should drop.

What's a good distance? Once you know the high-risk seasons and times, the hazard locations and the most common hazards, determine whether you can redesign

your operations to minimize the risks from any of these factors.

Are you running from a bear' When resources are stretched or safety isn't a priority, it's easy to say, "We haven't had any injuries, so we're fine." But the Parks Service doesn't tell visitors, "If you've never been attacked before by a bear, you'll be fine." That's because there's a first time for everything—and it only takes one bear attack to leave you dead. So small businesses shouldn't wait for an injury—or a fatality—to start taking safety seriously.

In Canada, the Institute for Work & Health (IWH) also took a look at the unique safety challenges that small companies face. Here's a look at a study they did.