



Ken Rayner:

If you're an Ontario business owner with less than 20 employees, here's a question worth considering. What are Ontario's safest small businesses doing that others aren't? Today's episode is about answering that question. We're exploring what sets high performing organizations apart, what every employer can learn from their success, and how the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board's redesigned Small Business Safety Awards are recognizing Ontario businesses that are leading the way in occupational health and safety.

Announcer:

It's time for the *IHSA Safety Podcast*.

Ken Rayner:

Welcome to the *IHSA Safety Podcast*. I'm your host, Ken Rayner. Joining me today is Carrie Briley, Director, Health and Safety Program Design, at the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board, otherwise known to many of us as WSIB. Welcome to the podcast, Carrie.

Carrie Briley:

Thanks for having me, Ken. Very excited to be here.

Ken Rayner:

Hey, I'm really excited you're here, and we're going to be talking about small business in Ontario, businesses typically with 20 or less employees, and what the safest and the healthiest of those small businesses are doing. And I think this is going to be a great episode for other small businesses in Ontario to listen to find out what they're doing differently. And I know we're also going to talk about WSIB's Small Business Safety Awards, but before we talk about the awards themselves, Carrie, what have Ontario's safest small businesses figured out that other Ontario businesses should be paying attention to when it comes to health and safety?

Carrie Briley:

Yeah, great question. And actually we are in the ninth year of our awards now, Ken. And through this journey, we've received a lot of great stories and I think there's a few things that businesses have in common. Firstly, they understand that health and safety doesn't have to be complicated or costly to be effective. What they do is they identify real challenges, they focus on practical solutions and solutions that really fit the size, resources and day-to-day realities of their business. Small businesses have unique needs and they don't have big budgets for health and safety. And so another thing that these businesses have in common is they involve their employees in identifying what hazards and issues are there and also in developing the solutions because workers often have the clearest view of the risks and the changes that you could put into place that will work. Another thing that they have in common is health and safety really

is a part of everyday operations and conversations, not an add-on, not a have to do, but it's really integrated into their operations, not just something to be addressed after an accident occurs.

And a lot of small businesses that are successful take a progress over perfection kind of viewpoint. They take action with small, consistent improvements that over time will reduce risk and build momentum. And the other piece that's very important is they measure what is working. They measure what's working, they learn from the outcomes and continue to improve. So I would say in summary, the key lesson is that strong health and safety practices, they're built through practical action, they're built through employee involvement and a commitment to continuous improvement, not necessarily through a big budget or a complex program.

Ken Rayner:

I love that. Really, everything you just stated, and just as you were stating that last sentence, in my head I was like, "She never mentioned anything that they have invested hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars to make this work." Everything you just suggested was practical and easy to do as long as you're planning for it and you're focused on it. That's fantastic. I'm going to ask you a really easy question. This might be the easiest one I'm going to ask you, Carrie, because I think I already know the answer to this, but why is it important and why has the WSIB made it important to recognize and celebrate organizations that are getting it right?

Carrie Briley:

Okay. Well, I think our conversations around safety, they're often focused on things like incidents, injuries, what goes wrong. And the redesigned Small Business Safety Awards, which is launching this September, allows us to shine a spotlight on what's going right. There's so many great organizations out there. They're doing amazing work in this space, but the stories often go untold. And so sharing those stories means other businesses can learn from their peers. They have real world examples to build around their own improvements. Health and safety, as you know, it's built around an internal responsibility system. Why not learn from others, involve everyone, leverage what's worked, and ultimately that will contribute to a safer Ontario all around. I think recognition matters for the WSIB because it reinforces positive behaviors and awards help create role models for others to take a look at. I think the awards go beyond celebrating individual organizations, but really they're about sharing simple success stories that will raise the standard of workplace safety across the province.

Ken Rayner:

Absolutely. And Carrie, you've done a really nice job with the videos that you've compiled on the winners in the past couple of years. I think really telling a good story in terms of what those businesses have accomplished. And they're obviously extremely proud when they've been recognized for what they've done, but they're not doing it for the purpose of winning the award, they're doing it for the right purpose of ensuring that everyone goes home safe at the end of the day. So I'm really glad that WSIB has recognized these organizations and are showcasing them for others to see as shining examples. And you stated that the Small Business Safety Awards have been around for almost a decade, I think you said nine years. And we're talking today about a program redesign. So we've had this going for nine years, it's been successful, but WSIB obviously thinks it can be more successful. So what prompted the redesign?

Carrie Briley:

Yeah, that's right. And after nine years, it's time for a refresh. Today's employers, they're navigating numerous economic pressures, work shortages, and we wanted to ensure that the awards really reflect the realities that small businesses are facing today. And so the redesign really helps by making it easier for them to enter more meaningful recognition to win and reflective of what practical health and safety looks like in today's climate. So we wanted to move to recognize a broader range of health and safety achievements, not just traditional health and safety management programs, but really digging into the innovation and creativity that comes with solving some of these safety challenges. And I would say most importantly, we want to better showcase the incredible work happening in workplaces across Ontario, better tell those stories, and that is an integral part of the redesign.

Ken Rayner:

Now you touched a little bit on maybe what's different about the new program in terms of maybe widening it in terms of the categories and the likes, and I'm sure there's lots of Ontario businesses out there who have had previous experience with the Small Business Safety Awards. Maybe they've seen the videos, maybe they've seen some of your announcements, your social posts. So what is different now about the new program, but particularly for those businesses that know about the existing program?

Carrie Briley:

Yeah, so one of the biggest changes is, I feel like there should be a drum roll here, but really excited to share with you that we are significantly increasing the amount of the awards. So we have increased to \$20,000 awards. Five of them will be handed out this year, and I think that shows a commitment to recognizing some of those good stories that are happening. In addition, it's going to be an easier experience. So businesses that may have applied in the past perhaps are aware that we had a multi-step process where businesses now, it's going to be very easy to apply through an easy-to-use platform, no additional submissions, no additional interviews after the application is submitted. And additionally, we want to get some great safety stories to rise to the top and showcase the ideas for other small businesses to learn from and adopt.

So we will be sharing those stories as part of the awards. Our application's set to open on September 14, so not far around the corner.

Ken Rayner:

Wow. Okay. So those are just some phenomenal reasons to look into this program. One, you've significantly increased the prize amount, so \$20,000, that's amazing. Two, you made the application process much easier and streamlined. Wow. So I'm hoping that businesses in Ontario that are listening to this podcast are all of a sudden sitting up and going, "Hey, you know what? This is maybe something I should look into." So maybe we can talk about these judges that are reviewing these applications that are being sent in. What exactly are they going to be looking for when they judge all of the applicants?

Carrie Briley:

Yeah, that's a great question as well. And I'll add to your previous point, winners are eligible to re-apply again after five years. So even those businesses that maybe have won in the past, please bring your newer stories to the surface because we'd be happy to hear them as well. The judges are going to be looking for really authentic stories with some evidence behind them. We're interested in businesses that really can show us how they identified that workplace health and safety challenge, took action and achieved results. And innovation really could take many forms. Sometimes it can be something like a new technology, a software that was implemented. It could be something like a practical change to a process, a training approach that's unique and innovative, or maybe a different way of involving workers and safety conversations that you hadn't thought of before now. So the judges are interested in that innovation piece, but also in sustainability.

How has this solution become part of the organization and how you operate day to day? The most important piece I would say is the judges will not be looking for perfection. We're looking for approaches that demonstrate meaningful outcomes and could inspire or be adopted by other small businesses. So that knowledge transfer piece is going to be a big piece of the judges' considerations.

Ken Rayner:

Yeah, that's fair. Carrie, that's a very, very fair statement. As far as I'm concerned, even if an organization has their workplace COR® certified or ISO 45000 certified and IAF accredited, they're not perfect. Even the most proficient organizations have opportunities to continually improve, right? So that's a very, very fair statement. So we have some of those small business owners that are aware of the awards, they've been a part of them before, they've heard about them, but we also have Ontario small business owners that are balancing labour shortages and rising costs and tight margins and don't always see health and safety in the same way. Some of them may see workplace health and safety as a definitive cost rather than an investment in their business. So what would you say to those workplaces who see it as a cost rather than an investment?

Carrie Briley:

Yeah, I totally understand why some owners may see health and safety as another expense, especially when they're managing so many different rising costs and different roles within their day-to-day. But I would also say that keeping people safe is also about protecting the stability and the success of the business. So an injury and illness, we all know that can create costs that go well beyond a claim. It can mean lost time, interrupted operations, overtime, retraining, lower morale, really added pressure on an already stretched team. So investing in prevention can help reduce those disruptions while improving employee wellbeing, trust, productivity, retention, all those things that keep people happy and active in the workplace. And all of those things, they really matter for a small business owner that's running a business with limited resources. I would also say it doesn't have to be a large financial investment. We were talking about that earlier.

Some of the most effective improvements are simple, low cost, maybe even no-cost solutions such as things like clear procedures, better training, stronger communication, or even involving your workers and solving re-occurring problems. Those things can be done very low cost. So yeah, I think the important thing is to focus resources on where you can make the greatest difference. So that means identifying the most serious risks and choosing practical improvements, building over time doesn't all

have to happen on day one. I would just also make the argument that studies and research shows that there can also be a measurable return. For every dollar spent on workplace health and safety, a business could see a return ranging from a minimum, a dollar, up to \$2.14 for every dollar invested in health and safety. So that makes it a true investment, not just a cost. Health and safety, my strongest argument, Ken, it's not separate from running a strong business.

It helps protect employees, it maintains your operations, it controls costs and ultimately strengthens the bottom line. You can't have a strong and healthy business without a strong and healthy workforce.

Ken Rayner:

Ooh, love that. That's a tagline.

Carrie Briley:

You can borrow it anytime.

Ken Rayner:

Thank you, Carrie. Thank you. It's a great, great answer. Loved it. Thank you so much. So look, you've made a great case for anybody who's listening who is an Ontario small business to apply for these awards, but there's still maybe some businesses out there that think, "I don't know, I'm pretty new. I'm maybe too small. I only have a couple employees. I don't think my health and safety system is good enough to apply." What would be your message to them?

Carrie Briley:

Yeah, so I would say first, why don't you go back and take a look at some of the stories of past winners and hopefully you'll be able to see yourself in some of them. We've had very small two-employee businesses win. And again, it's really about that innovation, that commitment to health and safety. And I know you talked about 20 or less employees, and I think that is the majority of our small businesses in Ontario. However, as long as you have less than 50 employees, you can apply for the small business awards. All you need is a WSIB account in good standing, less than 50 full-time employees. And like I mentioned earlier, past winners can even apply if it's been five years since your last award. I think a lot of organizations underestimate the progress they've made, assume they're too small, assume the impacts are not big enough, but you don't need to have a complex safety management system or a large health and safety department to tell your story.

If you've identified any safety challenge and you found a practical or creative way to address it, you've engaged your team, and you've learned some lessons along the way that other businesses could also learn from, you likely have a really good story worth sharing. Health and safety is a journey, not a destination. This is something that we all have to remember. It's not about being perfect, it's about making meaningful progress. The awards are designed to recognize that meaningful progress. So don't decide for the judges. If you've done something meaningful, consider applying. Please, we want your story.

Ken Rayner:

Amazing. And Carrie, I'm really glad that you clarified the definition of a small business because typically at IHSA, we refer to companies with 20 or less employees because they make up about 90 per cent of our membership. So that's typically what we talk about, but I'm really glad you clarified that because now obviously that has opened the door for a whole host of other companies who may be listening to this and say, Ken, you said 20 or less at the beginning of this podcast. Okay, I was wrong. Carrie's right. We got 50 or less employees when it comes to the Ontario WSIB's Small Business Safety Award. So that's great. So a lot more people can enter. Carrie, from a longer term perspective, for smaller businesses that want to strengthen their workplace health and safety over the long term, but may not know where to start, what would be a few practical tips from WSIB in terms of where they can begin?

Carrie Briley:

I love this question, and I'm going to reiterate a little bit of what I shared earlier. I think it's just starting with the basics. Health and safety doesn't have to be complicated to be effective. So start by identifying the most common or serious hazard in your workplace. Start with one. Focus first on those areas where workers could be most at risk and talk to your employees regularly. Go out on the floor, have a conversation. They know where the risks are, they know what's working and what could be improved, and when they can help identify and solve the problems, the changes that they come up with are likely to be practical and they're also more likely to be sustained for the long term. I would also advise to make safety part of everyday conversation. So short practical discussions can be more effective than waiting for a formal meeting.

Keeping records of what you're doing, including training, inspections, hazard controls, follow-up actions, just keeping records of what's happening. It shows progress. It keeps people accountable and motivated towards progress. And I would say talked about starting small, simple improvements that can make work safer, such as clearer procedures or building procedures where none exists, better communication, improved housekeeping. That's a small one that you can look at incorporating, refreshing some training, or maybe even changes to how the work is organized. So just start small and you don't have to wait till everything feels perfect. Small, consistent actions is what adds up to meaningful improvements over time.

Ken Rayner:

Yeah, love it. Excellent. And so you've covered off a lot. You started off with the first question I asked you and gave some really great practical advice on doing some things that really don't cost anything at all. You just gave some great examples now. How about we end with this, just like sometimes when someone's listening to a podcast or they're in training, if there's one good takeaway that they can implement in the workplace almost right after they either listen to the podcast or they go through the training, that can make a big impact. So if you were speaking directly to an Ontario small business owner who wants to build a safer and healthier workplace, what's the one thing of all the things that you talked about and you gave as options and recommendations, what's the one thing that they could do this week that you think would make the biggest difference?

Carrie Briley:

Okay, you're putting me in a hard spot to pick just one.

Ken Rayner:

Oh, definitely.

Carrie Briley:

It's so hard, but really, I think the most important thing a small business owner can do, and I hope I am talking to some directly, just talk to your employees about the workplace hazards that they see, choose one practical issue and address it together. So that would be my one thing, I think. And there's lots of resources to support you and your business. WSIB-registered businesses can sign up for a free business safety portal through their online services account. This provides free industry-specific templates, courses, fact sheets, other tools. If you're not quite sure how to navigate those conversations, take a look at the Business Safety Portal. It's a saving for your business up to \$1,700 a year for the subscription that your premium costs cover when you're registered with WSIB. If you need more focus support, you can sign up for a free, confidential Health and Safety Talk with a WSIB health and safety expert or one of our Health and Safety Association experts that can answer some questions that you have and help you identify the next steps.

And if you're ready for some more structured support, think about joining our Health and Safety Excellence program (HSEp). You may have heard of this, just a small plug for our program that if you make these meaningful changes and you build it within the program, you can actually earn rebates on your WSIB premiums as well. So small businesses can earn on average about \$9,000 a year just by participating and building their health and safety solutions through this program.

Ken Rayner:

Love it. Some great suggestions. So I love, again, the one I would've picked when I asked you that question would've absolutely been engaging more with your employees, right? Utilizing your team, making sure they feel that they are part of the solution, make sure they're part of contributing in the workplace. I think that's incredibly important. And I love the tips you gave on some of the WSIB resources. So that business safety portal, which can be a great repository for training records and the likes, and also a place where they can look for templates and other information, certainly the Health and Safety Excellence program, which can be a building block, and then the Health and Safety Talks where you can speak to somebody and ask questions in terms of what do I need to do to make my workplace healthier and safer? And you've got someone that can lead you to the right resources within Ontario's prevention system.

So Carrie, great answers. Really appreciate you being here to share all this with our listeners and great changes from WSIB on a program that was really popular already, the WSIB Small Business Safety Awards. And I can only imagine it taking off even more with greater cash prizes for the winners, significantly greater and an easier application process. So well done. And Carrie, yeah, so thanks so much for being here today to share all that.

Carrie Briley:

Thank you for having me, and please consider sharing your story through the Small Business Safety Awards. Our applications are open September 14. They close October 13, so you have just under a month to submit your application and have a chance to win \$20,000 for your business.

Ken Rayner:

Amazing. Amazing.

Carrie Briley:

Thank you.

Ken Rayner:

Thanks, Carrie. And thanks very much to the listeners to listening to our episode on WSIB's Small Business Safety Awards with Carrie Briley. Be sure to subscribe and like us on your podcast channel and visit us at ihsa.ca for a wealth of health and safety resources and information.

Announcer:

The *IHSA Safety Podcast*. For more episodes, tips, and all things safety, go to ihsasafetypodcast.ca. Thanks for listening.