



Best Safety Practices Based on the Nature and Stresses of Small Construction Businesses

Purpose

The Job-Site Safety Institute provided a grant to the University of Hawaii to better understand what actually drives safety decisions inside small construction firms — and to identify what firms, associations, and regulators can do differently to improve safety performance at that scale.

Problem

Small construction firms (fewer than 20 employees) make up **91% of all construction payroll firms**, employ roughly one-third of the construction workforce, and account for **approximately half of all construction fatalities** — a disparity that has not narrowed despite decades of industry attention. Prior research, largely based on surveys, has failed to capture the informal, real-time dynamics that drive unsafe field conditions. This study was designed to close that gap.

Research Aims

Using a qualitative, ethnographic case study design, the research team conducted:

- Semi-structured interviews with construction firm owners and managers across Oregon, Washington, California, and Hawaii.
- In-person site observations across multiple firms ranging from solo micro-contractors to a 50+ employee production homebuilder.

"The safety gap at small firms is not a knowledge problem. The gap is structural and operational. Closing it requires addressing the conditions under which safety decisions actually get made."

Key Insights

1. **Safety is personal, not programmatic.** Owner commitment to safety is widespread, but it does not reliably translate to field conditions — especially when owners are absent or when work is delegated to subcontractors.
2. **Schedule pressure dominates every safety decision.** Cited by 8 of 9 firms, time pressure is not a management failure — it is structurally embedded in the small-firm business model.
3. **Communication is front-loaded and not reinforced.** Morning briefings and toolbox talks are common, but safety communication rarely continues through the workday. PPE compliance was observed to be task-specific and did not transfer between similar tasks.
4. **Subcontractor management is the weakest link.** 7 of 9 firms identified it as an unresolved challenge. Contractual safety language transfers accountability on paper, but not compliance in practice.
5. **Regulation shapes posture, not practice.** Enforcement drives targeted, reactive fixes — not the daily operating discipline needed to prevent fatalities.

Solutions: The Coordinate–Communicate–Insulate Framework

- **Coordinate** — Assign a named safety contact per project; embed subcontractor safety requirements at the estimating stage; treat safety track record as a selection criterion; include safety status in routine owner–PM check-ins.
- **Communicate** — Open every site meeting with one specific, day-relevant hazard; brief subcontractor crews in person on arrival; stage PPE at the work location; conduct at least one unannounced site visit per week per project.
- **Insulate** — Build pre-task safety setup time into project schedules; establish stop-work expectation (not just authority) for every crew member; connect safety performance to business outcomes owners already track (e.g., workers' comp rates, client reputation).

Figure 1 summarizes how each three clusters—Coordinate, Communicate, and Insulate—shapes the safety management process and contributes to safety performance. Together, they represent the primary approaches in which small construction firms can influence safety outcomes. The recommendations are practical, resource-conscious, and grounded in practices observed in firms participating in this study. They are not a checklist, but daily operating disciplines that can be integrated into routine safety management.



Figure 1: The Coordinate–Communicate–Insulate approach to safety management in small construction firms

 **Source:** These recommendations are drawn from "Best Safety Practices Based on the Nature and Stresses of Small Construction Businesses," a research project funded by the Jobsite Safety Institute (JSI) and conducted by the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. View the full report at jssafety.org.



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JSI's goal is that everyone in the construction industry who goes to work comes home safely to their family. Our mission is a research and educational organization dedicated to eliminating job-site related injuries and deaths in the construction industry.

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