

Within the NIOSH Small Business Program, we're interested in the ways that small businesses differ from larger ones and how those attributes might affect safety. Construction is one of the more dangerous industries, and it's filled with small businesses, so we have a project going on where we're seeing what type of health and safety help NIOSH can provide to small business owners in the construction industry. We did some customer discovery interviews and we built a web-based prototype, which we iteratively redesigned until we had a good sense of the types of things small construction business owners would respond to. Today I'm going to share with you my experience of interviewing 41 small business owners this summer. I have some audio clips pulled from my interviews to play at the end of my presentation.

that define their work, pain points that they would love to eliminate, and opportunities for gain. I wanted to investigate what those tasks, pains, gains were so that I could identify overlap between what these companies need and what NIOSH has to offer.

I wanted to interview individuals, not focus groups, about their attitudes toward their work. I had no interest in learning what they thought about NIOSH or any of its products. While I made sure we talked about safety and health, it was not the main point of discussion. I was far more interested in learning about what these business owners cared the most about, whether that included safety and health or not. Previously it had been difficult for me to find good people to talk to. So this time I hired a marketer here in Cincinnati named Crystal Kendrick. She owns Voice of Your Customer, a local small business. As an aside, I highly recommend Voice of Your Customer. I asked Crystal to recruit a variety of small business owners in the greater Cincinnati area who do residential construction and who would be willing to talk to me for half an hour about their work.

["By Trade" slide]

Crystal arranged interviews with 41 owners and managers. The majority did general contracting or "handy man" work. Within that group, most had gotten into the business with a specialty, but had expanded their services to accommodate customers until they could do anything. Several told me they did everything "down to the studs," which sounds kind of like a dating show, but I never mentioned this to any of them. People who identified a work specialty tended to mention that they could do other stuff too.

When I asked how they built their business, they all had a few successful early jobs and from then on never had to advertise. In most cases they told me they had more work than they could do and they only received customers through word-of-mouth. A few of the newer businesses hadn't yet accrued a consistent customer base. I assume either they will, as all of the more mature companies had, or they would go out of business. No one who had been around for more than 5 years was still scrapping for jobs. A couple of guys mentioned that

they've become the "staircase guy." So I found that the categories were a lot more fluid than I thought they would be.

["Company Size" slide]

To defining what I meant by "small," I asked Crystal to find companies that had 20 or fewer employees—but the smaller the better. I wanted ones where the owner still did core work. Coming from the Federal government, it's really hard to find sole proprietors. Thanks to Crystal, the bulk of the people I talked to worked alone or had a few helpers, usually a friend or relative they had hired. Many had worked with other partners or in bigger companies before going on their own. Some had started and stopped their business more than once based on opportunities and the economy. A few were moonlighters who worked for a big company and ran a business on the side.

Health insurance was a factor in their employment decisions. The moonlighters kept their day job for the insurance, which would have been unaffordable otherwise. Full-timers, especially those with a few employees, complained that it was hard to compete when they had to factor insurance into their bids. As one contractor noted,

heard a nearly universal suggestion that the trades were dying, that it was the domain of older guys. I don't know if the data bears that out. My suspicion is that people will take an opportunity to earn a buck if one arises.

Employees showing up and doing good quality work  
Guys not showing up  
Hard to hire  
Hiring and the stigma of construction as "dirty" work  
Manpower issues  
No calls and no shows  
No-go workers  
Productivity drops when management isn't on site  
Showing new people around a work site



**Results**

"You can do amazing things"

Beautifying

Before and after

Before/after

Bringing things to life

End results

Fast gratification with finished jobs

Having people be excited about work you've done

Positive reviews

Satisfaction from finished job

Seeing a finished product

Seeing a great result

Transition from trashed to excellent

**Autonomy**

Able to be selective about jobs

Being able to use "your own people" for subs

Can't be fired

Freedom

Freedom

Freedom, no boss

Love having the freedom

Sense of control

Sense of control

Working alone

Working for self

**Relationships**

Access to general contractors

Being able to trust others on the job

Friendships with clients

Getting referrals

Knowing good people in the business

Meeting people

Meeting people

Personal relationships with workers

Working with good people

**Reputation**

Being respected for your work

Getting work on strength of reputation ("when they call me, they know what they're getting")

I did this



Helping people  
Physical activity  
Working outdoors  
Working with hands

**Integrity**

Being honest in bids, time, and work  
Doing work honestly  
Sense of integrity, knowing work is great

**Cleanliness**

Keeping the job neat and clean  
Leaving a work site clean

**Safety**

Everyone home safe

When I asked about safety issues, I got a mix of responses. I heard a few maxims like "safety first," "be patient," and "only do things you're comfortable with." I got lists of equipment they use, and lists of hazards they worry about. They told me stories about things they had witnessed, heard about, or experienced. I also heard several things that hinted at a larger story: "You got to make sure that the wall is secure"; "Be really careful about soft spots in the floor."

People who had worked at big companies had a much better handle on safety and were far more likely to have training. The bigger businesses valued safety more highly. No one at all talked about fear of fines or regulators. Several indicated that they found inspectors and people of that stripe to be useful assets.

Many of the business owners—especially in the smallest companies—shared a fatalistic view of their long-term safety and health, which was often paired with comments about their lack of health insurance. One man mentioned that he tried to be safe, but he was almost certain he would "get something 10 years down the line. I'll get sick from something we don't even know is bad now."

Several tried to glaze over safety quickly.

"I never got hurt...No, once..." He was patching masonry, he fell, and a ladder landed on him. Then he recalled several eye injuries. He broke his collar bone once. Then there was the time he cut his finger on a sawz-all while installing some shelves. "I breathed lots of craps and got lots of sinus infections. I hated wearing a mask and goggles. I « n