Designing Inclusive Professional Clothing Round Table

Providing Solutions for Those with Specific Needs

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Diversifying Workforce

The global workforce has become increasingly diverse in recent decades, reflecting greater acceptance of diversity in gender, background, and disability. According to recent statistics, women made up 40.1% of the global workforce in 2023, with the European average reaching 46.4%. In the UK, as much as 8.7% of the workforce lives with a disability.

Traditionally male-dominated sectors have seen significant increases in female participation too. For example, women now comprise 16% of construction workers in the UK. This shift has brought attention to the inadequacies of existing workwear and PPE, which have historically been designed primarily for male bodies and does not always provide appropriate protection for women.

As the workforce diversifies, those responsible for providing uniforms and PPE must adapt to ensure safety and respect for all staff. Every employee should have the right to a uniform that fits their needs, regardless of gender, age, or disability status.

Introduction

The Professional Clothing Industry Association Worldwide (PCIAW®) hosted the first session of the Designing Inclusive Professional Clothing Round Table on 6th June 2024. The discussion highlighted the importance of creating inclusive options for uniform, workwear, and PPE, addressing how various elements of garment design affect different groups and how designers can adapt to meet all wearers' needs.

Supporting Staff with Fabric Technologies for Comfort

Participants agreed that stretch fabrics consistently outperform non-stretch options in wearer comfort, broadening fit tolerance and ensuring unrestricted movement. Stretch fabrics can also reduce the number of sizes companies need to stock which helps with the logistics of uniform management, as higher fit tolerance means garments can change to fit the wearer even if the size isn't a perfect match.

Innovations in fabric technologies also include moisture-wicking fabrics, temperature-regulating materials, and breathable fabrics. These improvements are crucial for employees working in hot conditions or wearing PPE for extended periods, particularly benefiting those with medical conditions affecting temperature regulation.

Cultural and religious considerations were addressed, with manufacturers committed to developing options for minority cultural and religious backgrounds. This includes fire-resistant and arc flash-resistant head coverings for use as hijabs, and loose-fitting modesty garments.

Maternity Wear & Menopause

The challenge of providing effective maternity wear was discussed, with innovations becoming increasingly important as more women work through pregnancy. Participants shared success stories of developing maternity sizes across product ranges, using fabric panels to change garment size dynamically.

Modular interchangeable pieces can adapt to different stages of pregnancy and the postpartum period, protecting and clothing women without compromising on their safety or compliance with uniform standards.within the industry, the FR brand keeps its finger on the pulse and translates the needs of the wearers into a roadmap for innovation.

Adapting workwear for pregnant employees can have significant psychological benefits, boosting confidence and job satisfaction. This can lead to improved employee retention both during and after pregnancy, ensuring talent stays within the company.

Menopause is another area where inclusive design can make a significant impact. Many workers experiencing menopause feel they need to leave their roles due to symptoms, which could be avoided with the right support. Professional clothing designers can improve comfort through inclusive design, potentially retaining valuable talent in the workforce.

Participants discussed incorporating technical fibres to help thermal regulation and combat hot flashes. Cooling innovations such as moisture-wicking fabrics and breathable textiles can promote air circulation and help expel heat. Adaptable layering systems allow wearers to easily adjust clothing in response to sudden temperature changes.

The importance of cut and fit in designing menopause-friendly workwear was addressed. Looser fits, adjustable waistbands, and stretch fabrics can accommodate body changes that occur during menopause.

Fit-Focused Workwear and PPE

Participants stressed the need for garments made with specific fit morphologies, considering the differences in proportions and ergonomics for different groups of wearers. They found that so-called unisex or gender-neutral garments were often based on male fits, failing to support women's bodies and sometimes causing safety hazards. It was agreed that manufacturers should offer products in male-based and female-based fits, using alternate terminology if desired to avoid gendering.

The importance of inclusive sizing terminology was discussed, with suggestions to move away from potentially stigmatising terms like "plus size" or "extra large" in favour of more inclusive systems such as numbered sizes.

Addressing diverse body types and regional sizing differences was a key focus. Experts stressed the importance of accurate measurements and region-specific size charts to ensure optimal fit, as different geographical regions have different average measurements.

While producing alternative fits can be costly, some participants chose to support these wearers, sacrificing profit to maintain cost parity with mainline production. Body armour production was highlighted as a crucial example where proper fits are necessary for protection, as poorly fitted body armour will not protect the wearer if it cannot evenly dissipate the impact of ballistics across the body

Adaptive design in workwear was explored as a solution, using stretch materials and tightening straps to accommodate different body shapes and sizes. This could reduce stock variants while still providing good fit for a wide range of body types.

Participants emphasised the importance of involving diverse end-users in the design process to develop truly functional and comfortable professional clothing. One participant summed it up: "As long as the wearer is happy, we are happy."

Issues with Minimum Order Quantities (MOQs) and Making Inclusive Design Work as a Business

While inclusive design benefits wearers, providing specialised items like maternity panels can be challenging, particularly when considering MOQs and stock management. Manufacturers must ensure their products are commercially viable, as the cost of manufacturing inclusive uniforms can sometimes exceed their market value.

Innovative approaches are being explored to address these challenges. Incorporating more stretch fabrics and using advanced knit techniques can expand fit tolerance, reducing the varieties of sizes needed as mentioned previously. Modular solutions, such as garment expansion packs, allow existing uniforms to be modified as needed.

Whilst the industry is still grappling with making niche products economically viable, addressing these challenges is necessary for operating a professional clothing business in the modern day. Pioneers who expand into the market now will benefit from being industry experts in the near future.

Neurodiversity and Sensory Needs

The round table devoted significant attention to the needs of neurodivergent employees. Approximately 1 in 7 people has some form of neurodifference, with many more going undiagnosed. In the UK, neurodifference is considered a disability under the Equality Act 2010, requiring employers to make reasonable adjustments to ensure employees are able to work.

Neurodifferences typically manifest in two primary ways: affecting dexterity or influencing sensory processing. To address these diverse needs, designers and employers must communicate with their neurodiverse employees to learn what kind of support they need.

For those with dexterity issues, innovative design adjustments can make a significant difference. Magnetic closures and hook-and-loop fasteners offer ergonomic alternatives to traditional zips.

Compression fabrics can enhance fine motor control, while non-slip footwear provides crucial stability.

Sensory sensitivities call for a more nuanced approach to workwear design. Thoughtful modifications such as carefully positioned labels and seams, neutral colour palettes, and durable, fidget-resistant zips can significantly reduce sensory overload. Designers should avoid potentially irritating materials and opt for softer fabrics for emotional support.

Offering diverse garment options is important to accommodate the wide-ranging comfort preferences of neurodivergent employees. Including neurodivergent people in wearer trials will help guide designers to the right garment construction choices.

Summary

The professional clothing industry is undergoing a transformative shift towards more inclusive practises, driven by changing workforce demographics. Key takeaways from the discussion include the critical role of advanced fabric technologies in enhancing comfort for maternity and menopause-friendly design, the need for fit-focused professional clothing to keep all wearers safe and comfortable, and the importance of wearer trials in ensuring designs meet the needs of all employees.

Stretch fabrics, adaptive designs, and inclusive sizing terminology emerged as broadly applicable, high-impact changes to support all employees through their garment choices.

While challenges remain, particularly in managing minimum order quantities and stock for specialised items, the industry shows a strong commitment to learning and evolving. The future of workwear lies in designs that not only protect but also empower every individual in the workplace.

The next Inclusive Design Round Table, scheduled for September 19, 2024, promises to further advance these crucial conversations, involving discussions with manufacturers and end users to seek further understanding of how garment design can support wearers in the workplace. Creating inclusive uniform, workwear, and PPE changes people's lives, and PCIAW® will support this industry in protecting each and every employee and accommodating their needs.

67%
women (aged 40-60) negatively affected at work by menopause symptoms

15%
global population are neurodivergent with differences in brain functions

16%
of the world's population experience significant disability

14%
of the population has some form of neurodifference (approx)

16%
of UK construction workers comprise of women