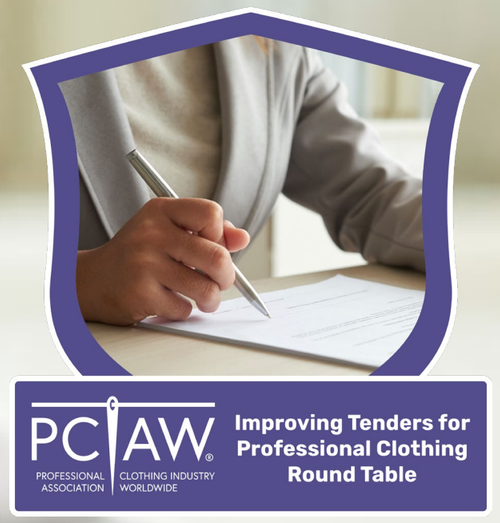
Improving Tenders for Professional Clothing Round Table

Outlining Technical Specifications and Circular Solutions



BUSINESS IN THE COMMUNITY

The Prince's Responsible Business Network

incorporatewear

GORE-TEX PRODUCTS

RIYADH AIR
طيران الرياض

Sarah Wilsher

workwear solutions
bid · design · source · manage

around

TEIJIN ARAMID

WINNITEX EST. 1964

Hampshire & Isle of Wight
FIRE & RESCUE SERVICE

UNIFORM BUYERS' NETWORK

AIR CANADA

MADEIRA

TMD

State of Tenders

In professional clothing procurement, creating effective tenders is challenging. Many buyers struggle with technical specifications, balancing user needs and budgets. Poor-quality tenders lead to suboptimal outcomes, frustrated suppliers, and dissatisfied end-users. A knowledge gap results in unrealistic timelines and overly broad specifications.

The industry needs resources to empower tender writers. Supplying buyers with core textiles information, best practises, and guidance from experienced procurement specialists can significantly improve tender quality. Better tenders will improve buyer satisfaction, streamline processes for manufacturers, and ensure frontline workers have the best available uniforms, keeping them safe and satisfied.

Introduction

On 30th May 2024, PCIAW® hosted its first Improving Tenders for Professional Clothing Round Table. The session aimed to bridge the gap between buyers and suppliers, addressing common pain points and identifying best practises for more effective tender processes. Participants included representatives from major airlines, postal services, textile manufacturers, and industry consultants.

The Complex Web of Stakeholders Behind Procurement

A key pain point is the organisational complexity of the procurement process due to varied stakeholders.

While many organisations have dedicated procurement teams, final decisions often require board approval, leading to challenges in setting timeline expectations. Senior executives unfamiliar with uniform production timelines often fail to give adequate lead times.

Participants shared examples where production timelines were compressed despite warnings from manufacturers. It was proposed that buyers should be more aware of realistic production times, with success stories shared where procurement teams visited factories to understand production realities, timelines, and the processes necessary to create a finalised garment.

The discussion revealed that procurement teams often make decisions without consulting experts, leading to suboptimal outcomes. Participants emphasised the need for better dialogue between suppliers and buyers, noting that technical requirements are often written too broadly. It was suggested that buyers invite manufacturers to share expertise and propose solutions within their tender bid, focusing on communicating wearer needs.

Bridging the Knowledge Gap

A common theme was the knowledge gap between buyers writing tenders and suppliers. Procurement teams lacking staff informed about professional clothing struggle to understand available technologies and options.

Industry consultants suggested using Request for Information (RFI) processes and Pre-Qualification Questionnaires (PQQ) to gather information from suppliers before publishing a tender. Buyers can engage with industry outside the tender process, and buyer networks can promote information sharing without direct supplier involvement, further promoting learning and understanding for the benefit of the buyers.

A well-informed procurement team can respond to suggestions dynamically and build realistic plans. Participants shared examples where experienced procurement teams enabled more dynamic product development, contrasting with cases where lack of understanding led to frustration. Educating procurement officers as much as possible makes the process easier and quicker for both sides.

The Importance of User Input & Effective Logistics

Participants unanimously agreed on the critical role of user input in the procurement process. Some organisations shared their wearer-focused approach to uniform evaluation, using questionnaires to gauge satisfaction. Including staff opinions and feedback in the tender process ensures great fit and increases staff retention.

Organisations launching new uniform designs without staff confidence have faced public backlash, particularly on social media. Participants suggested procurement teams try on existing uniforms to gain insight for future designs.

Round table participants stressed the importance of aligning all parts of the uniform supply chain toward the same targets, working with designers, logistics, and distribution teams to ensure effective rollout.

Technical Evaluation and Wearer Trials

The complexities of technical textile evaluation were discussed, with participants suggesting best practises for selecting uniforms. Military organisations provide innovative solutions, such as assigning different sizes to each tender bidder to efficiently test fit data.

While comprehensive wearer trials can add significant time to the tender process, participants suggested ways to streamline this, such as using stock fabrics in single colours for initial trials. Setting realistic expectations and working within suppliers' capabilities can progress wearer trials more quickly.

Analysing Product Performance

Participants emphasised the importance of collecting data on end-of-life garment failures to understand key improvement areas for future tenders. This data can also be fed back to manufacturers to improve their offerings. Academic projects investigating garment failure points provide opportunities for industry collaboration to extend product lifespan.

Recording reasons for garment returns was suggested as an innovative approach to inform uniform teams about popular items and issues. The concept of "emotional durability" was highlighted as important for creating lasting, popular uniforms.

Increasing durability, either through product strength or wearer appeal, is one of the best ways to save money in uniform procurement and reduce carbon emissions. Investing in longer-lasting uniforms can significantly reduce costs and environmental impact over time, aligning with circular economy principles and improving employee satisfaction.

Compliance and Certification

The discussion on compliance and certification revealed varying approaches and some frustration with current processes. Some participants expressed difficulties with particular certifications, noting unnecessary retesting requirements for complete garments even when all components were certified.

Procurement experts highlighted the legal requirement for safety product certification in most markets, cautioning buyers about the illegality of purchasing uncertified safety products. Independent testing of products was recommended to ensure compliance, as employers are liable for safety equipment meeting requirements.

Use cases for un-certified products were discussed, as buyers can save money and time by progressing without non-essential certifications if the garment fulfils technical requirements. Participants noted that some innovative but small manufacturers might lack certification budgets, so buyers should use test data to confirm product requirements. This approach can promote competition and innovation among SMEs in professional clothing.

Manufacturer Responsibility

Sustainability and ethical considerations are increasingly important in procurement processes, with many tenders now including Environmental, Social, Governance (ESG) specifications. It's crucial that ESG specifications have verifiable metrics and independent audits to mitigate greenwashing risks. With upcoming eco-legislation, incorporating ESG elements into tenders now is important.

Participants recommended using independent audits and certifications with clear, communicable criteria for sustainability and social responsibility scoring. They warned against certifications claiming flawless manufacturer operations, as this often indicates a lack of thorough analysis.

For organisations working with uniform manufacturers without their own production facilities, choosing accredited partners can significantly reduce costs compared to certifying products independently.

Summary

The PCIAW® Tenders Roundtable provides a valuable forum for buyers and suppliers to discuss and problem-solve textile and uniform procurement complexities. The stand-out message from the first session was a need for better communication, more comprehensive understanding of industry realities, and innovative approaches to longstanding challenges.

Several recommendations emerged for improving the tender process:

1. Improve communication: Foster better dialogue between buyers, suppliers, and end-users throughout the procurement process.

2. Educate stakeholders: Ensure all parties understand textile manufacturing timelines and opportunities, using RFIs and PQQs to stay up-to-date with textiles innovation.

3. Encourage innovation: Write tenders allowing suppliers to suggest innovative solutions rather than overly prescriptive technical specifications.

4. Leverage user input: Incorporate wearer trials and feedback mechanisms into the tender process to ensure user satisfaction.

5. Streamline wearer trials: Consider innovative approaches balancing thoroughness with efficiency to reduce lead times.

6. Analyse failures: Implement systems to track and analyse garment failures to inform future tenders and product improvements.

7. Balance certifications: Require necessary safety and responsibility certifications but be cautious about demanding excessive certifications that may exclude smaller suppliers.

This initial dialogue sets the stage for ongoing collaboration between buyers and suppliers in the professional clothing industry. Increased knowledge sharing benefits both sides of the tender process, incentivising cooperation.

PCIAW® plans to progress the round table project by bringing together more diverse perspectives and creating an open dialogue, generating new opportunities for innovation in textile and uniform procurement.

20-30%
cut to costs through increased garment durability

15-25%
cut to carbon emissions through increased garment durability

30-40%
cost reduction when choosing accredited partners, compared to independent product certification