DESIGNING INCLUSIVE WORKWEAR

ROUND TABLE

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One Size Does Not Fit All: Redefining Inclusivity in Professional Clothing and PPE

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PCIAW® Round Table: Designing Inclusive Workwear

The professional clothing industry has a critical responsibility: to ensure every worker is safe, comfortable, and able to perform their job without impediment from their uniform or PPE. For years, this has been a challenge, often relying on the flawed concept of "one-size-fits-all" or "small men's sizes" for a diverse workforce. However, as highlighted at a recent PCIAW® Round Table, a new era is dawning—one where inclusivity is not a courtesy, but a non-negotiable standard.

Speaking in the video podcast, Natalie Wilson, Managing Director of Workwear Solutions International and a PCIAW® Board Director, framed the issue, "Our industry shouldn't be the reason why somebody can't go to work because we aren't able to provide them with something that fits them properly and allows them to do their job safely."

The conversation, featuring powerful testimonies from leaders in critical sectors, revealed the human cost of this historical oversight. Amy Beams, a 21-year veteran firefighter and Director of Women in the Fire Service UK, shared that a recent survey of her members found problems with "everything." From ill-fitting boots and gloves to ill-proportioned structural gear, the lack of a holistic approach to sizing created issues across the board.

Sarah Gibbs, Standards Development Manager, British Standards Institute, recounted a common, yet alarming, personal experience from her time in the utilities industry: being handed a boiler suit for a six-foot-four man and a helmet that "could have swung around on my head." These are not just inconveniences; they are tangible threats to health and safety.

The panel provided chilling examples of the life-and-death stakes involved. Juliet Coleman, Director of Security Women, relayed the story of bulletproof vests for Ukrainian soldiers that were simply smaller men's versions, causing them to be so uncomfortable and ill-fitting that the women had to hold the vests while running, making them unable to use their weapons. This directly compromises operational effectiveness and mission success.

Similarly, Natalie Wilson described a police officer who was severely injured because a gap created by her body shape in a standard-issue vest allowed a knife to pass through. These are not isolated incidents; they are symptoms of a systemic failure to recognise that a workforce is not uniform. The mantra, as declared by Yvette Ashby, PCIAW CEO, is clear: "One size does not fit all, not even on the men."

The round table identified several key steps for moving forwards, starting with a fundamental shift in mindset and a commitment to new data. A major breakthrough is the new British Standard, a free-to-access guidance document on inclusive PPE. This standard is the world's first for inclusive PPE, and was fast-tracked and completed in a record eight months, provides a framework for employers to understand and address the diverse needs of their employees. It will give both end-users and buyers the language and authority to demand properly fitting gear.

The conversation also underscored the critical need for better anthropometric data. The sizing exercise at the Women in the Fire Service event, captured the measurements of female firefighters across various roles, is a prime example of an initiative designed to provide manufacturers with the information they need to develop products that actually fit.

It's an eye-opening step toward understanding the diversity of body shapes within a sector that was historically designed for a single male archetype. Finally, the panellists stressed that buyers and government agencies must make inclusive fit a non-negotiable part of the tender process. Specifying that suppliers must cater effectively to a genuinely diverse workforce will be the ultimate driver of lasting, meaningful change.

This is a collective effort. It requires manufacturers to invest in R&D, buyers to be more demanding in their specifications, and end-users to vocalise their needs. The PCIAW® is taking a leading role, not only by spearheading the new standard but also by bringing these conversations to a European level, ensuring that the momentum doesn't stop here and inspiring global collaboration across the industry. The message from the round table is a powerful one: the future of workwear is not about "unisex" solutions but about providing a product that is truly "fit-for-form," guaranteeing safety, performance, and dignity for all professionals, everywhere.