An expensive suit will always be synonymous with business success and 'go-getterism' but, as this article shows, performance textiles are now allowing people who wear more conventional workwear to turn heads too.

Catwalk corporate wear is all in a day's work

By Joy Tibbs

Is power-dressing possible for people who work with power tools? Can construction workers now turn the heads of attractive passers-by, rather than the other way round? The organisers of a new event, the Workwear and Corporate Clothes Show, would answer both these questions in the affirmative. They believe all forms of practical, work-related apparel can be suited to the catwalk and hope to showcase the latest innovations to come to light in this sector at the event, which takes place in April in Birmingham, UK.

The organisers report that the corporate clothing, workwear and personal protection equipment (PPE) industry is worth an estimated £430 million in the UK alone, with approximately 32 million garments made every year. Yvette Ashby, who is part of the organising team, says: "I firmly believe and know that everyone who wears any kind of uniform wants to look smart. You'll get far more out of your staff if you give them a little touch of style." She hopes to reflect this on the catwalk at the event.

Workwear must first do the job

The primary purpose of workwear is obviously to offer wearers functionality and protection geared toward their specific field of employment. Whether for the construction sector, the food preparation industry, or for office work, employees must be kitted out in gear that is appropriate to their job descriptions. To achieve this, many uniform providers incorporate special technical fibres and fabrics into their ranges so that staff members are both comfortable and equipped to do the job. Technical textiles are "paramount" and "vital to design", explains Ms Ashby, and this will be reflected by the Birmingham show's 100 exhibitors, including Snickers, Dickies and Lion Apparel.



The priority for most workwear is that it has to be practical.



The opening of a new Barclays branch in Liverpool last year. The bank has realised that everyone who wears a uniform wants to look as smart as possible.

Barclays

Sweden-based Snickers Workwear offers a range of apparel and accessories for tradespeople, including high-visibility vests, fleeces, rain trousers and gloves. Several of its trousers and overalls use Invista's Cordura for added durability and resistance to wear and tear.

The company also employs Coolmax technology in some of its most recent shirt-lines. Combining 32% Coolmax and 68% cotton, its shirts help to transport moisture away from the skin, and are lightweight and breathable—ideal for manual workers during the summer months. Other technical attributes associated with the Snickers collection are its own patented MultiPockets, DuraTwill, Twisted Leg and Antiflame technologies.

Similarly, Texas-based Williamson-Dickie (Dickies) emphasises the need for materials that support the employee's everyday needs. One of the largest workwear manufacturers in the world, the company selects and tests its fabrics and components for durability and resilience to frequent washing. "The key elements are choice of fabric and construction techniques," says its UK marketing director, Maurice Morton.

Its Eisenhower range, which comprises three jackets, trousers, a pair of shorts, a bodywarmer and a fleece, is best suited to the construction industry and associated trades; the fleece, for example, has an intermediate, laminated barrier to make it windproof and breathable. The company employs special techniques in manufacturing to increase the strength of the garment, including reinforced stress points and triple-stitched seams. In addition, stitched and



Performance textiles are important to Swedish workwear manufacturer Snickers. It has build Cordura into its range of trousers and Coolmax into its shirt-lines.

Snickers Workwear

taped seams produce far greater resistance to water penetration, according to Mr Morton. The zip front has a stormflap, reflective trim and nylon Oxford panels, with extra pockets for a mobile phone and other work-related objects.

The firm's Safety Hiker boot range provides regulation steel toe-cap protection along with a range of other safety features, including flexible steel midsoles to protect the foot from sharp hazards underfoot, antistatic soles, impact-absorbent heels, and slip-resistant treads. It also features a Cambrelle lining to help keep feet cool, comfortable and dry throughout the working day.

Meanwhile, Ohio-based Lion Apparel offers high-tech apparel for the US emergency services, military and civilian agency uniform and personal equipment markets. In November, the Evansville (Indiana) Fire Department made the decision to use its Janesville V-Force coats and trousers made from isodri Protective Systems fabrics. The isodri helps to combat the problem of wet turnout gear, using an advanced moisture management system. V-Force is designed to offer mobility with bunching of materials in key areas such as the elbows, shoulders and knees and each firefighter has been given custom-fit apparel to improve fit, comfort and mobility.



Workwear can also look the business

There is clearly no shortage of technical workwear options, as these companies show. However, can such manufacturers also offer the "wow factor" that Ms Ashby envisages for the catwalk show? "Every male and female worker wants to look sexy," she says, "it's all about image." She prefers to leave it to the 5,000 visitors who will attend the event to judge whether exhibitors are able to rise to this challenge.

Ms Ashby cites financial services firm Barclays as an example of an employer that recognises the importance of style for its corporate uniform. "Staff should be able to wear the uniform without feeling like they are doing so," she says, "especially women". The company's Jeff Banks-designed "wardrobe" system allows staff to choose between uniform items so that they can keep individuality while still reflecting the corporate theme.

The Snickers range also includes items that correlate with modern fashion trends. Indeed, many younger people across the world will own some sort of jacket, sweatshirt or hoodie similar to one from its range and will happily wear it either for work or simply for a trendy casual look outside business hours. Meanwhile, its First Layer products bear a strong resemblance to base layers in the Nike and adidas ranges, giving them a sports-related appeal.

Furthermore, in a bid to appeal to image-conscious women, the company has brought out a new trouser range, which is said to offer a more feminine fit. "Naturally, women need the same levels of functionality, protection and comfort in their work clothes as men, but as we know, men and women do not look the same. Therefore, fit and design are important too," says Snickers product development manager, Henry Lundberg. He emphasises the importance of appearance both in the workplace and beyond. "The clothes should look good and fit well regardless of whether you wear the trousers at work or during leisure time," he says. The trousers are primarily intended for women working in the transport and service industries and are made from polyester and cotton for greater comfort and washability.

Feminine touch

Another well-known workwear manufacturer, Carharrt has been adding a more feminine touch to its primarily male-dominated workwear collection. While many women have been accustomed to wearing the company's apparel in male sizes with sleeves rolled up or the waist nipped in, Carharrt decided to cater more effectively for its female customers, who constitute approximately one-third of its client base. It now sells around 40 items for women, including outerwear, trousers and accessories. New colours, including 'Vintage Rose', have been introduced, and fit has been altered so that women do not feel frumpy in, or drowned by, their work apparel.

Dickies has also been considering the aesthetic appeal of its products. "In recent years there has been a trend in workwear manufacturing that has seen greater emphasis placed on modern styling," says Mr Morton. "This development has been largely customer-led with younger more style-conscious workers seeking workwear that reflects contemporary clothing styles." He indicates that loose-fitting chino trousers, jeans and combat trousers with large pockets on the leg can all help bridge the gap between function and fashion as they are comfortable and practical. He also links his company's collection of fleece jackets, bodywarmers, hooded sweatshirts, parkas and bomber jackets with items that can be found in any shopping mall.

Nevertheless, although there can be some crossover, functional workwear is never intended to be an exact replica of clothing that can be found in designer outlets, or vice versa. "There are major differences between workwear garments and equivalent styles found in the high street and understanding these differences determines whether a new workwear range will be a success," Mr Morton explains. "It is important to remember that the main purpose of the products is to provide protection in the workplace; they need to be tough, durable and manufactured to a standard that will withstand conditions everyday clothing and footwear are not subjected to. If these qualities are overlooked in favour of more fashionable styling, then the range will not be fit-for-purpose and ultimately fail," he adds.

This means that, while Snickers, Dickies and Carharrt may choose to make design changes to provide better fit for women, or to give workwear a more contemporary feel, appearance is always secondary to a garment's functional properties. It will be interesting to see how this is reflected on the catwalk at the Workwear and Corporate Clothes Show. Those producing goods for the office world, such as the Barclays uniform, perhaps have more freedom and scope in terms of style. Yvette Ashby says that suppliers should be looking to dress workers in such a way that they can move seamlessly into after-work activities or corporate events without feeling inappropriately dressed. She said that this could often be achieved by simple means, such as a cut on the sleeve, a waistcoat, or cufflinks; anything that creates a little extra panache. The role of the catwalk event is to bring suppliers and buyers together in order to build relationships and share ideas so that the right balance between performance, practicality and presentation can be achieved.

