



What To Do About PPE Non-compliance Fashion, Fit, Comfort & Performance Are Key Considerations

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By Dave Matela
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Fashion, fit, comfort & performance are key considerations

According to a survey we conducted at last year's National Safety Congress, 89 percent of safety professionals polled have observed workers failing to wear PPE when it was necessary. This is the third consecutive year the survey revealed a high rate of PPE noncompliance — with 87 percent in 2007 and 85 percent in 2006.

In 2007, discomfort was found to be the chief cause of noncompliance. The second was workers' opinion that their PPE was not necessary for the task. This was followed by complaints that the PPE was too hot, fit poorly and was unattractive.

In a tough economy, it is tempting to cut costs by purchasing less expensive protective apparel, but if it rips or breaks, the resulting waste will negate any savings. Also, if PPE is uncomfortable and workers don't wear it, resulting injuries and reduced productivity cancel out any potential savings.

Consider wearability

“Wearability” is often not adequately addressed when selecting PPE. If coveralls don't provide breathability, if safety glasses fog up, if protective gloves don't allow for hand dexterity, or if respiratory straps are tight and painful to wear, users will avoid wearing the PPE or will modify it in some way, compromising its protective features.

Wearability extends to garment fit and compatibility. Fit relates to apparel sizing and body geometry. For example, a garment's sleeves must not ride up to expose skin when the wearer reaches forward. From a compatibility standpoint, both specifiers and users need to understand whether gloves should be taped to the outside of the sleeve (if, for example, the use scenario calls for bending over and immersing one's hands in a dangerous liquid) or to the inside of the sleeve (if, for example, the use scenario calls for heavy chemical splash exposure, to prevent the splash from dripping down into the cuff of the glove).

Other fit and style issues should also be considered. For instance, when PPE is “connected to” the wearer, compliance becomes more automatic. Integrating earplugs with safety glasses via a lanyard, for example, makes complying with hearing protection protocols much easier because the PPE is within easy reach.

Appearance matters

When it comes to style, a range of color and style options gives workers some control over how they look. When people are content with their appearance, they are more likely to wear the PPE without modification. PPE should allow workers to express their individuality, while PPE that is perceived as “cool” will more likely be worn, especially by the emerging Gen-Y workforce. Manufacturers are increasingly adapting PPE to reflect trends in the consumer fashion and sports apparel industries.

For garments to be comfortable, the size and cut must meet the needs of a diverse workforce. If a garment is too small, the wearer may be exposed to hazards due to rip-outs, or may modify the garment to make it more comfortable. Garments should offer a generous cut that exceeds ANSI minimum sizing standards, especially across the shoulders and key stress areas like the torso and crotch. A slightly fuller cut will enhance the comfort of the garment and help reduce pulls, tears and rip-outs.

An elastic waist helps improve fit and makes a garment more comfortable and wearable. Stretch panels under the arms and across the back offer better fit, increased range of motion and built-in freedom of movement that enable coveralls to move and stretch with the wearer. It's also important to select garments that offer a greater range of sizing options to fit both women and men, as well as a wide range of body types.

Comfort extends beyond clothing

Comfort and fit are important for other types of PPE such as eye protection, gloves and respirators. Eye protection products should offer comfort with cushioned brows, gel nosepieces, vented frames and anti-fogging features. Selecting protective eyewear that resembles fashion eyewear also helps to encourage compliance. Always make sure, however, that eye protection offers crucial safety features such as impact-resistance and distortion-free lenses, as well as sufficient protection from harmful UVA and UVB rays.

Glove compliance is dependent upon comfort and fit; if a glove is comfortable, users are more likely to comply with PPE protocols. Fortunately, with the advanced glove materials available today, options extend beyond function to include fit and comfort. Style is becoming increasingly important, and some manufacturers are offering signature colors such as purple, blue, grey and orange.

Since uncomfortable respirators are less likely to be worn correctly, here again it's important to look for comfort features that encourage all-day wear. These include soft foam nose pads, full perimeter foam and adjustable head straps, and ultrasonically bonded head straps that help keep respirators securely in place without pulling or breaking. And remember, when respirators are necessary and are issued to employees, a fit test is required by OSHA to ensure proper respirator selection and fit for each individual.

For additional information and resources on compliance with PPE protocols, visit the OSHA Web site at www.osha.gov, and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) Web site at www.cdc.gov/niosh.

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