SYSTEMATIC PROTECTION: HOW MODERN PPE COMBINES SAFETY, STYLE AND RESPONSIBILITY

An interview with attorney Thomas Lange, Managing Director of GermanFashion, on new requirements for personal protective equipment (PPE).
PPE is no longer a side issue. In addition to providing reliable protection, it must comply with legal standards, be practical and increasingly take fashionable aspects into account. In addition to gender-specific fits, ergonomic diversity is coming into focus. Standard sizes don't suit all body types. Individuals with a very slim, strong, or asymmetrical body structure, orthopedic needs, or restricted mobility require PPE that fits – both for comfort and safety.
We invited Thomas Lange for a conversation to explore today's necessities of modern PPE.

LAW, REGULATIONS AND RESPONSIBILITY

A+A: Mr. Lange, where do you see the biggest challenges in PPE in terms of legal requirements? Are the regulations becoming stricter or increasingly complex?

Thomas Lange: Legal requirements for PPE have not only tightened in recent years but have also become far more complex. The PPE Regulation (EU) 2016/425 sets high standards for conformity, testing procedures and documentation – and it's continuously updated. At the same time, we see a strong interconnection with other fields, first and foremost, sustainability, diversity and digitisation. That demands companies develop a much deeper understanding of the legal framework, particularly when launching new products or customising PPE.

A+A: How well are companies prepared for these requirements – and how important is the interaction between buying, product development and occupational safety?

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Thomas Lange: In general, companies are well-placed. From our perspective, the interdisciplinary collaboration of the different company departments is crucial to bringing solutions to the market that are both compliant and practical.

A+A: How should it be assessed from a legal standpoint when a company provides PPE that is not suitable or even unwearable for certain employees, for example, with unique body types? Do obligations in terms of individualised equipment already exist?

Thomas Lange: Yes, absolutely. The employer is not only obliged to provide PPE but also to ensure that it is suitable, which means: it must fit and be wearable. If an employee is at risk or unable to work due to unsuitable equipment, there is legal liability. Both the Occupational Safety Act and the PPE User Ordinance clearly state: the employer is obliged to take individual requirements into account – even if this means procuring special sizes or custom-made equipment.

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PRACTICE-ORIENTED KNOW-HOW AS A KEY COMPETENCE

A+A: As part of the GermanFashionAkademie, you offer a part-time training program for PPE specialists. What do participants learn – and what makes this qualification unique?

Thomas Lange: Our training program for PPE specialists provides the practical know-how needed to develop, procure and introduce PPE in compliance with legal standards. Participants not only learn the relevant legal foundations, but also the specific requirements arising from standards, certification procedures and product testing. What's special is the modular structure, which closely involves experts from both theory and practice.

A+A: What are the participants' professional backgrounds?

Thomas Lange: They are very diverse – and this is what makes the training so dynamic. Participants come from buying

departments, product development or quality assurance, but we also welcome safety specialists and even designers. The majority come from companies operating in the fields of workwear, professional attire and protective clothing.

A+A: Many companies see PPE mainly through the lens of occupational safety. Why do you believe it's essential for buying, product development and design to have a solid understanding of PPE requirements?

Thomas Lange: Today, PPE is no longer just an occupational safety product. It is a complex system product that must be functional, legally compliant, economical and wearable all at once. Buyers must understand which requirements matter beyond the price. Product developers must possess legal expertise to prevent future complaints and stay up-to-date with new legal requirements. And design is crucial when it comes to wearing comfort, fitting, look and acceptance. Such shared understanding results in better products and fewer liability risks.

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FIT, DIVERSITY AND USER ACCEPTANCE

A+A: In how many fields are there complaints that PPE does not fit properly, especially for women and individuals wearing very small or large sizes, unique body types or physical restrictions? How significant is this issue from a legal perspective? Are there already normative or liability-related requirements demanding secure-fitting equipment?

Thomas Lange: Yes, these requirements are already relevant today. When PPE does not fit, it doesn’t meet its purpose – and this can have liability consequences. Employers are obliged to ensure individual suitability. In other words, if a standard size doesn’t fit, it’s not sufficient. Standards – like DIN EN ISO 13688, for example – require an appropriate fit. De facto, it means investing in diversity. Only then can legal risks, accidents and dissatisfaction be avoided.

PPE BETWEEN FUNCTION AND FASHION TRENDS

A+A: The utility look is very popular among Gen Z. Where do you draw the line between fashion-inspired workwear and PPE that requires legal certification? Can you give an example where this overlap becomes dangerous?

Thomas Lange: The protective function clearly defines the line. Once a garment must provide protection – for example, against heat, chemicals, or mechanical risks – it needs certification. Especially at the highest protection levels, where life and limb are at stake, safety takes precedence over style matters.

A+A: How mindful do companies need to be when fashion trends imitate the look of safety-relevant clothing – without providing any protection?

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Thomas Lange: Extremely mindful. Visual imitation can easily evoke false safety expectations from employees and third parties. There is also a liability risk here. Companies should clearly document and communicate which garments are PPE and which are not. A clear distinction is essential, especially when employees wear both fashion-inspired workwear and genuine PPE in the same work environment.

SUSTAINABILITY AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

A+A: The industry increasingly talks about recyclability, transparency and sustainability. How much does this affect PPE products, and what do companies need to consider in this context?

Thomas Lange: Sustainability has been anchored in the processes of the PPE industry for a long time. However, there is still a need to ensure that, in terms of PPE, user safety must always be the top priority.

A+A: If you could adjust an aspect – in terms of standards, training or product design, for example – what would you change to ensure that, on top of protecting, PPE better meets the requirements in terms of fit, comfort and design?

Thomas Lange: Authorities and certification bodies should take the manufacturers' responsibility for their products seriously without undermining them by overregulation. It is not acceptable that manufacturers are – rightly – held accountable for their products, yet are not free to decide how to promote and market them.

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