



Holly Baril:

For decades, women in construction have had to adapt to tools, environments, and especially to clothing that was never designed with them in mind. If you've ever worn pants that don't sit right, sleeves that are too long, or gear that just feels off, you're not alone. For so many women on the jobsite, finding workwear that actually fits is a daily struggle. Proper fit and workwear is often overlooked, but for women in construction, it's one of the biggest challenges. This leads to reduced mobility, discomfort over long hours, and even potential safety concerns on site.

Announcer:

It's time for the *IHSA Safety Podcast*.

Holly Baril:

Welcome to Workwear That Works, the podcast where women in construction finally get the fit, function, and respect they deserve. We're talking real workwear for real jobs. Gear that moves with you, protects you and actually fits your body. From jobsite insights to design conversations, we're here to challenge the industry standard and raise it, because when your clothing works, you can focus on what really matters, getting the job done right. My guest today is Alicia Woods, founder of Covergalls based here in Sudbury, Ontario. Thank you for joining me today, Alicia.

Alicia Woods:

Thanks, Holly. Excited to be here with you.

Holly Baril:

This podcast actually is a, a great follow-up to the Women in Trades Event that I hosted last week here in Sudbury. I had asked you to set up a booth so that you could showcase some of your women's clothing to our female students here in Sudbury. Just tell me a little bit about that experience with the students.

Alicia Woods:

Yeah, for sure. So first of all, thank you for allowing us the opportunity to participate, Holly. You and your team did a great job. I think those events are really key to not only inspiring and engaging the next generation of females, but actually having them, uh, take back that information to their homes and have conversations with their parents, right? About these career choices. Certainly for us at Covergalls, you know, when I see the young females come over, and they find out that they actually have workwear for them, their eyes light up. Because I think when you have workwear that fits you properly, you feel included. But the biggest thing that I walked away with from that event with was seeing that at least half of the girls were either, you know, interested in the mining industry or actually told me they were already thinking of getting into it.

And that was probably the highest percentage of females at an event that I saw that were, you know, already thinking about the mining industry. So certainly something positive for us to take away.

Holly Baril:

Great. And, and you know, it's funny you say that because the other trades that were in attendance, when I went to speak with them after the event just to get their feedback. They said that they could not believe the engagement level of the students in the trades and the different questions. So I was very pleased with that. I think that age group was the right age group for that event.

Alicia Woods:

Yeah. And I found a very frequent comment was, you know, "my father or my grandfather are in the mining industry" or "were in the, in the mining industry". And I think to see young females following you their fathers and their grandfathers into this, I think speaks volumes. Because I think as a father and a grandfather, you would not want your grandchild, whether it's male or female, to enter an industry that was not safe.

Holly Baril:

Yeah, correct.

Alicia Woods:

So, things are changing.

Holly Baril:

Yeah, for sure. And the one thing I had taken away when I did a podcast with four young ladies—women in the trades, and they're new to the trades. And one of them said, "We don't have enough mentors. There's not enough people to talk to. I have no one to talk to." So, you know, the more that enter and the more, then the more there is for someone to speak with and be mentored by. So, yeah, this is great. Apparently I have to do the event again next year, so, you're invited.

Alicia Woods:

We'll be there. Good.

Holly Baril:

All right. So before I get into my questions, I just wanted to know if you could give our listeners just a little background about your company?

Alicia Woods:

Yeah, absolutely. And maybe I'll take it even a step back from there, Holly, in terms of a little bit about me. I always tell people I feel like I grew up mining. And what I mean by that is I think anybody born here in Sudbury, Ontario, you know, mining is around you. It's just part of your everyday life. And for me, my

dad, my grandfather, my uncles had a manufacturing business where they actually repaired underground mining equipment. Then they went on to design and manufacture their own. So, growing up, I spent a lot of time in the shop, and I think that was kind of my first interaction with the mining industry.

Fast forward as a young female entering the industry in 2000, I remember having to go to the local safety supply store to get all geared up to go underground that first time. And to my surprise, there was absolutely nothing for women. And I think I was surprised because growing up, I always felt like the industry was for me. You know my family always made me feel like there was a place for me. So, walking into that safety store to discover there was nothing for females really made me kind of start to think about this.

So, Covergalls is really born out of my frustration and not finding any workwear. And I'd say it was that day, but it actually took me about 10 years to really feel the pain of having to wear men's workwear.

Holly Baril:

Yeah. I feel your pain because I worked for a general contractor back in Timmins, and I was on site, and I had this big jacket. It did not fit. And I pretty much was told, it's size small men's, you should be good. And that was kind of what I had to go with and what I ended up wearing. So now I'm just curious. I know probably mining is what inspired you to start the company. Is there anything else that inspired you to start the company and also what has been the most rewarding moment so far?

Alicia Woods:

In terms of inspiring me to start Covergalls. As I mentioned, it was born out of my own frustration in wearing men's coveralls, but as I started to wear the garment, and other women would stop me and they would say like, "Where did you get your coverall?" I was like, "How do they fit you so properly and how are you drinking water?"

It's like this unspoken thing that women just weren't doing, and still aren't doing, is keeping hydrated, out of, you know, not wanting to take everything off to face, um, you know, the end of a drift, somewhere in the bush, porta-potty that you don't wanna touch, right? So those are certainly some of the challenges. Getting the feedback from women inspired me to do something, but then what really tipped it for me was when Vale gave me their approval for this garment and that was like instant validation of the garment and that there was actually a need for it.

And it was at that moment that I took the product on Dragon's Den. It just so happened to be an audition in Sudbury not long after Vale gave us the approval. And we went and did the audition, and then we were given the opportunity to actually pitch the product Covergalls. And I think being on that show and kind of demonstrating the fit, the functionality, and how garments make people feel included, really generated interest from women across the country. And that was the most rewarding part. I felt like we were bringing islands of women together, you know? So often as females you're working for an organization, you may be the only one and you may think you're the only one in that industry, but there are pockets of women all over. And I think that was the most rewarding thing in the beginning, definitely bringing those islands together, making women feel like they weren't alone.

Holly Baril:

Interesting. I guess I didn't do much research. Dragon's Den, ooh, that's kind of scary. I always visualize if I ever went on there, I'd have to make sure I have all the answers because they're gonna try and trip you up and question you and it's so stressful.

Alicia Woods:

Oh my goodness Holly, you're so right. So I will say, and my family will vouch for me, I have never studied that much for anything in my life, because I wanted to make sure I could answer every single possible question. And when I went in there I never expected to get a deal, let alone be featured on the season premiere of Dragon's Den. So that experience was worth far more than I could have ever imagined.

Holly Barril:

Oh, that's awesome. That's great. So, what was the biggest challenge in launching the company?

Alicia Wood:

Oh my goodness, there have been many challenges along the way and we could probably do a podcast just on the obstacles that I faced. But for me, the first challenge in the beginning was actually finding a manufacturing partner who would produce the garment for me. The second that I would tell them it was female workwear, the phone calls stopped being returned. The emails went unanswered. Most of the manufacturing companies said it was not a market. They did not see the potential. It wasn't until I met a female at a manufacturing company in Montreal. She really pitched it to her owner to do a private label. And he actually saw the future opportunity, so he took that chance and they went and produced my first batch of Coveralls.

Now, fast forward, I do look at some of those companies that I did engage with, and they are making women's workwear. Although it is not true female fit, it is the "shrink it and pink it" approach. But interesting how years later they now see the potential and opportunity.

Holly Baril:

They now see that women are actually joining construction in the other trades and...

Alicia Woods:

Absolutely.

Holly Baril:

I guess we do have to outfit them in proper clothing.

Alicia Woods:

Yeah, for sure. Which to me is good, right? Because we are making change and having impact. And you're right, Holly, the numbers are increasing in the various industries.

Holly Baril:

So you did mention other workwear brands. So how do you differentiate yourself from the other female workwear brands that are out there?

Alicia Woods:

We are made for women by women. The garments are designed and produced based off of our own frustrations and having to actually wear the garments to do various jobs. I think also our approach to engaging with women in the field, getting feedback, not afraid to change our garments. Making modifications and continually improving. I think also always trying to be out in front in terms of new innovations. How can we continue to disrupt the industry?

Adding maternity workwear was something that wasn't looked at before. It is niche, but the reality is if we want to attract and retain more women, this is part of their journey. Also looking at sustainable fabrics. So I think for us it's what more can we do in the future to make sure that females feel safe, healthy, and feel included in the jobs in which they're performing?

Holly Baril:

Yeah, sometimes you're right, you don't think of some of those other dynamics, right?

Alicia Woods:

No, and I think too, there's room for competition. What we've done as well is teamed up with some other brands where our products are complimentary, right? There's no point making products when one exists today and it's doing really well. There's a lot of other female-led female brands that we actively support and work together with.

Holly Baril:

So what channels drive most of your sales would you say?

Alicia Woods:

I would say the top two channels would be our distribution partners. The relationship with Mark's Commercial like none other. Mark's is a company that is dedicated to investing in proper-fit workwear, making sure that women have quick access because they do have inventory on their shelves. The other way would be, you know, working with organizations who now have initiatives and, you know, standards and policies to ensure their females have proper-fit female workwear. So those would be kind of the top two channels: our distribution partners and then also some of the large organizations that we actually started working with right from the beginning who saw the opportunity and wanted to grow together.

Holly Baril:

Now, you did mention some specific problems in traditional construction clothing for women. How do you approach fit and sizing for the different types of bodies and what material or features are most important in your design when it comes to durability, flexibility and all that stuff?

Alicia Woods:

Yeah, there's so much to learn. And, you know, my background is underground mining equipment, not clothing and design. So I've learned a lot along the way. However, my director of, design, production and quality control, Amelie, has decades of experience in this area and with diverse body types. And again, it's working with women who are in the field, doing fit tests, doing trials and sizing, making sure that not only the fit is good, but also, does the garment function? So what makes the Covergall unique, for example, is the rear trap door for bathroom breaks, right? So you're not having to take everything off. It's a two-way zipper around the front, a rear trap bathroom door, kind of a little bathroom break, in the back. So again, building in functionality. Women love pockets, right?

So, making sure that we have space on those garments to carry those items. And I think, you know, fabric matters too, right? You want fabric that is comfortable, you want moisture wicking and antimicrobial property. So we're always looking to continually improve, and having Amalie on the team has been really instrumental to the growth of Covergalls.

Holly Baril:

Now, you did mention that you do receive feedback, great. Now what feedback from your customers has most influenced your product evolution?

Holly Baril:

Oh my goodness, there's been lots. I think, you know, if we start with the Covergall itself, like I mentioned, I made it for myself so that I had a garment that was safe, functioned, fit me properly. But it doesn't mean that that's gonna work for everybody else. And I remember engaging with an amazing group of women at Impala and at first they were a little reluctant to come forward with feedback on the Covergall. You know, they were sharing it with the person who actually created it. But we actively encouraged people to come forward and to share that feedback. People are using garments in different ways. They're doing different tasks in their job and the feedback from Impala was really important and led us to the Covergall 2.0 where we had a better fit.

We had different features. We even had hidden pockets for sanitary items. So, we do encourage women to come forward. The other thing is, you know, after launching the Covergall, we quickly realized that not every female wears a coverall on their job, right? And women needed pants and bibs and jackets and shirts. So Vale, again, stepped up and gave us a group of women to sit around a table and start looking at the cargo pant. How could we make it better? And really, that's how our product line continues to evolve and grow.

Holly Baril:

Okay. Yeah, that's awesome. And it's funny you say that, right? 'Cause it's like anything else, you're asking someone for feedback and they're kind of hesitant. It's like, "Oh, do I give you the true feedback?" And that's what you want. In order to improve and move forward, I need feedback, positive or negative. It doesn't matter. It's to improve the, the outfit, the clothing. And like you said, not everybody wears the coveralls. So the pants, the shirts, the button-up shirts, t-shirts, undershirts, all of

that is part of clothing that we need. Jackets, gloves. I love your gloves, by the way. I wear them all the time.

Alicia Woods:

Thanks. Yeah, women have reached out to say, like, "I don't want to insult you, but ..." I'm like, "Oh my goodness. Please don't feel like you're going to insult us. We want that feedback. We encourage it." And it doesn't just apply to the garments. It, it applies to really all aspects of the business. I mean, hey, we're human and we drop the ball, and we have challenges, and we have things that we need to improve on, you know, overall. So we actively encourage people to reach out on all areas.

Holly Baril:

So who do you think would be your core customers and then how do they typically discover your brand?

Alicia Woods:

Our core customer would be any female. However in terms of how we've been able to get the product out there, it has really been through education. You and I would think it's a no-brainer. Women need proper fitting workwear. This is not about fashion, this is about safety, this is about health, this is making sure that people feel included. But we've had to do a lot of education. And I would say after CSA came up with their report where they surveyed over 3,000 women across Canada on PPE, those stats really helped to kind of drive those messages home, right? Like when you go to a health and safety person or procurement or HR or even a general manager on site and you share those stats with them, their, you know, mouths drop because, for them, especially if they're male, they've never experienced those challenges.

And what happens then is, since they're aware, they have to go back to their workforce and start asking those questions because most women will not speak up, right? Women just want to be recognized for the work that they do. They don't wanna, you know, seem like they're complaining so most women won't speak up. But when we educate companies, it forces them to look internal and say, "What are our female employees wearing?" And from that, that's how we start to make change.

Holly Baril:

Yeah, you're right. Now, you said the CSA came out with a study. And in their stats was there anything mentioned about what the biggest unmet needs were for women in construction apparel?

Alicia Woods:

They were just saying generally over 50 per cent of women, you know, aren't given the proper-fit workwear. Thirty-eight per cent of women actually take it home and modify or use a workaround, which includes, you know, elastic rubber bands. It includes them cutting things apart and resewing including, which is absolutely terrifying, five-point harnesses. So women are actually taking them home, cutting them apart and resewing them to use, which is a huge, huge safety issue and liability. So these things are happening and the challenge that we faced early on as well was, your garments are more expensive than the men's coveralls and men's workwear. Yeah, they were and some pieces still are because our

volume is not the same as men's. However, if you look at a female she's got a flame-resistant coverall and you're putting her in men's and she's taking it home and cutting it and resewing it, it is no longer certified.

She is most likely not using the flame resistant thread or components to put that garment back together again. So if you take a look at the initial cost of the men's coverall, the time it's taken her to, you know, modify it, that cost and then what happens if there's an incident or an accident, right? Like you can't even compare the 20- or 30-per-cent premium to what's actually happening.

Holly Baril:

That makes sense. That never crossed my mind. I mean, I knew people were adjusting stuff, but to that extent, like you're saying, yeah, that's actually horrifying.

Alicia Woods:

Yeah, it is.

Holly Baril:

Kind of sad, to be quite honest.

Alicia Woods:

Yeah.

Holly Baril:

Have you seen a shift in demand as more women enter the skilled trades?

Alicia Woods:

Yes, absolutely. I think, you know, because companies are putting in policies to make sure that women have access to proper-fit PPE, we are seeing that. I think also what we're seeing is that younger generation of females are actually starting to speak up, right? I think of myself early on in my career, I didn't really speak up. You just kind of want to fly under the radar, you just want to do your work. People already know I'm a female because my blonde pigtail is hanging out the back of my hard hat, but we're seeing a shift in women actually using their voices, the young females. Which is great because that's how we continue to make change. But definitely, I mean, if you look at the numbers, there are women increasing in the various sectors, whether it's mining, construction, oil and gas, and trades. And with that becomes a greater need to make sure that they are safely outfitted in PPE.

Holly Baril:

Yeah, exactly. Well, that's good to hear that some of the younger generation is actually using their voice to, like you said, speak out on their clothing that they're wearing and that it's not safe for them to maybe do a task without the proper PPE.

Alicia Woods:

Yeah. And you know what? I always say to individuals at organizations when I'm having conversations with them, clothing empowers a person, right? Think about when you woke up this morning and you got dressed. Clothing is a reflection of who you are, it gives you confidence, that translates over into a safer, healthier, and more productive day. And the other question I do ask individuals, especially—actually all men pretty much —when they're challenging, do women really need proper fit PPE? I say to them, "Do you have a daughter?" And if they say, "Yes, I have a daughter," then I say, "Well, would you let her wear your work wear all day, every day?" And they immediately say no, and then that's when the light bulb goes on and they, and they think, "Wow, what are the women in our organization wearing today?"

Holly Baril:

Do you actually get those questions? You get questions that say, "Is women's clothing necessary?"

Alicia Woods:

My god, absolutely, Holly, more than you would think. In the beginning when we first started appearing at trade shows and events, men would come over and say like "Why is this necessary? It's not about fashion." I'm like, "You're right. It's not about fashion. This is about safety. This is about making sure that people feel included or creating inclusive work environments." And just the other day, I had somebody come up to me and say, "Well, now that my daughter is in the industry, I'm gonna get her geared up with the Covergalls product because I wanna make sure that she is safe, that she feels included and that she's empowered." And I said, "Well, what about the other women who have been working for you for the last 20 years?" But it was only until the moment where his daughter was entering the workforce that he then really saw the challenge and then wanted to make a difference.

Holly Baril:

Yeah. And that's too bad because in all honesty, you know, it should be anybody that's working should have the proper fit of clothing. Wow, I didn't know that.

Alicia Woods:

Well these are the things, right? You don't know until you know. And I always say once you know that it's up to us as individuals to make that change that is needed.

Holly Baril:

So what are your plans for expanding the product line?

Alicia Woods:

Oh, we're excited. We're always working on things in the background. As I mentioned, you know, looking at new fabrics, expanding the relationship with one of our partners called Waste2Wear where they make fabrics using recycled items so that we're taking a sustainable approach to the clothing that we're producing. We are working on men's workwear pieces as well because we do get a lot of requests from men saying we want garments that fit us better, that feel better, and that we're proud to wear. So

we're always working to grow and really just to disrupt an industry that has remained unchanged for far too long.

Holly Baril:

Are there new markets geographically or professionally that you're targeting?

Alicia Woods:

Yeah. We'd love to expand our reach into the US market, and then obviously around the globe. The nice thing is the mining industry really touches all parts of the world, right? So that's how we've been fortunate enough to get our garments exposed to different regions around the world. And I think in terms of industries, Holly, I would say at least once a month we're learning of a new place that our garments are used, right? We're touching women in large animal healthcare. We're touching women who are in pottery, uh, trades, uh, volunteer force firefighters, right? So there's so many areas that our garments are transferable to.

Holly Baril:

Interesting. Yeah, that's awesome. You kind answered my last question, but how do you see the brand evolving over the next five to 10 years?

Alicia Woods:

I think for us, it's just making sure that, you know, we can access, you know, more women who are in roles that need proper-fit work wear. So we'll continue to educate. We'll also continue to inspire and engage women to consider these industries as career choices. I'm very passionate about the mining industry and what it has to offer. It has certainly, you know, given me the opportunity to not only have a rewarding career, but actually be an entrepreneur as well, right? So making sure as an organization that we're giving back and we're doing our part to, you know, make young females aware of these opportunities. And we want to become kind of like, I say the Kleenex of tissue. If you think about it, Tissue is a product, Kleenex is the brand and we wanna become kinda, you know, the, the female Covergall coverall.

Holly Baril:

Awesome. I love it. Okay, great. Do you have anything else you'd like to add or before we wrap up?

Alicia Woods:

I just think, having these opportunities, Holly, to, to share the story, to share what we're doing, this is how we reach a greater audience and increase visibility. So, definitely appreciate the opportunity that you and IHSA have given me to not only participate in your trade show and your events, but to take part in this podcast with you today.

Holly Baril:

Okay. Well, you're welcome and thank you for taking the time to be a guest on our podcast.

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