

Koolway Sports

Koolway Sports designs and manufactures custom, high-quality, adaptive outerwear for individuals with disabilities, specially designed to be easily worn in conjunction with pieces of adaptive equipment, such as wheelchairs.

Headquarters	8 Balsdon Crescent, Whitby, Ontario, L1P 1L5
Year Established	2009
NAICS	315220 - Men's and boys' cut and sew clothing manufacturing, 315249 - Women's and girls' cut and sew clothing manufacturing
Employees	7
Major Expansions	N/A
Exports	US, EU
Parent Company	N/A
Other Locations	N/A

The Canadian apparel manufacturing industry was among those hit hardest during the 2000s due to the rise of outsourcing to cheap foreign labour. However, this challenge did not dissuade some visionary entrepreneurs, like the founders of Koolway Sports (Koolway), from building strong clothing manufacturing businesses—businesses that are not only experiencing rapid global growth, but doing so with social responsibility and sustainability at their core.

Koolway is a designer and manufacturer of adaptive outerwear for individuals with physical disabilities. Founded 10 years ago by Chief Operating Officer Jennifer Gallienne and President John A. Cook, Koolway has developed a variety of exceptional protective clothing products—including KoolKoats, KoolKapes, and KoolBoots—that are specially designed to be worn in conjunction with adaptive equipment. For example, the company’s “KoolKape” is a jacket designed to be wrapped around an individual while seated in a wheelchair or power scooter. Koolway products improve the lives of individuals who require adaptive equipment, allowing for a more comfortable fit and saving significant time when getting dressed and undressed. Cook estimates that total time savings can be upwards of several hours per day.

By filling an open niche market, Koolway has seen strong and consistent demand for its products and experienced high annual growth. Cook estimates an average revenue growth of over 15 percent year over year. However, this growth has not been at the cost of Koolway’s commitment to quality and social and environmental responsibility.

Koolway prides itself on creating high-quality products that are made entirely in Canada with Canadian and

USA milled materials. These products are extremely durable, typically lasting upwards of 10 years. Cook believes that Koolway's customers are happy to pay a premium for these products because they provide substantial value to the owner throughout each garment's long lifetime. Cook and Gallienne take great pride in their quality control process, estimating that only a couple orders per thousand result in defects; even then, they work hard to find ways to repair the product by providing materials and putting the customer in contact with a local sewer who can repair the garment. This low error rate saves waste and costs associated with higher material usage.

The company is also exploring ways to reduce the amount of waste generated through its standard production process. Koolway operates on a minimal-scrap basis, finding creative uses for the large amount of scrap materials that are traditionally generated in clothing manufacturing. Larger scrap items are used in Koolway's line of accessories (e.g., for mittens and toques), while smaller scrap items are donated to organizations such as the Rotary Club of Whitby Sunrise.

In a recent interview with CBC, Cook noted that many customers find Koolway's products "life-changing," allowing them to be more comfortable and independent.

Since starting out with just a small amount of material, a single sewer, and few industry connections, Koolway has grown in an industry that can be unforgiving to small apparel businesses. Around the time Koolway entered the market, outsourcing had caused the Canadian apparel industry to significantly contract. According to Statistics Canada, Ontario clothing manufacturing sales declined over 70 percent from 2002 to 2010. Gallienne recounts having to constantly hunt for fabric mills and other suppliers, even going so far as to ask other clothing manufacturers for a list of reliable suppliers. Unable to achieve cost effectiveness with a fully operational production facility due to its small size, and having seen many other large production operations close down, Koolway has operated and grown through a dedicated industrial sewing team that often works from home. Each sewer has had many years of experience in high-end apparel production with national brands. Cook mentions that many of the company's current sewers are skilled industry labourers that were either laid off, had their workplace close operations, or had their hours cut due to industry downsizing.

Therefore, while growing its sales and establishing a supply chain, Koolway was on the lookout for a production partner that could help with fulfilling larger orders. Listening to a CBC radio interview in 2015, Gallienne first became aware of Marilyn McNeil-Morin, director of George Brown College's Fashion Exchange program. At the same time, McNeil-Morin was in the process of expanding the Fashion Exchange program's clothing production operations to allow it to take on external production orders. Gallienne and Cook set up a meeting with McNeil-Morin and the three quickly formed a partnership that would help Koolway develop its production capabilities to meet orders globally.

McNeil-Morin describes an apparel manufacturing ecosystem—a network of relationships between designers, manufacturers, and labourers. She stresses that Ontario's manufacturing ecosystem is lacking robust relationships available for small and medium-sized clothing manufacturers, making it difficult to find proper labour and

production logistics that allow manufacturers to effectively scale up production.

Thanks to this partnership, Koolway has recently been able to fulfil two large partnerships with international organizations: Permobil Canada, a wheelchair manufacturer, and Zappos Adaptive, a subsidiary of Amazon. Koolway was one of two Canadian manufacturers chosen to be listed on Zappos' Adaptive retail marketplace, and the Fashion Exchange program's production covered 48 percent of its total order. In order to partner with Zappos Adaptive, Koolway had to introduce many new systems and international standards that allow it to fill orders internationally. Cook explains that having to prepare for this deal meant that Koolway is now well prepared to ship globally and partner with many national chains in the U.S. and E.U.

With no intentions of outsourcing or taking on products outside of its scope, Koolway is committed to maintaining its strict quality standards with a reliable product line and workforce. Cook notes that Koolway is always looking to hire skilled sewers, but stresses that they must be a good fit with the company culture. As part of their onboarding process at Koolway, all sewers are expected to attend an in-person fitting of a customer's order so that they can see the impact these garments have for their users and their families.

Koolway is implementing several strategies to continue its strong growth in the future. The company is planning to increase the size of its orders, primarily by developing new partnerships similar to those with Permobil and Zappos Adaptive. Moreover, now that Koolway has met the established business standards for international sales, Gallienne and Cook are looking at increasing the firm's presence beyond North America. Additionally, they are focusing their marketing to target repeat customers and complementary businesses. At present, rather than explicitly advertising Koolway's products, Gallienne and their new digital media specialist, Rachel Wendt, run an active social media campaign that is designed to build a community of like-minded individuals worldwide.

As Koolway continues to grow, it will have to find new ways to scale up production without compromising the quality of its products; this will mean expanding its supply chain and labour force in an industry that has yet to fully recover from its losses of the past two decades. With partnerships like the one it currently enjoys with George Brown College, Koolway aims to steadily grow its operations and emerge as a global leader in adaptive outerwear.