I’m standing in a cubicle the size of a phone booth, surrounded by a set of purple curtains, when a red laser beam starts zooming through the box. It’s recording data points of my body—about 1 million of them—from almost every possible angle. A tour group of curious tourists—some 50 from almost every country—begins to file in. They don’t move! They’re not quizzes!

At any given time, lab may be trying to develop a better bra for breast cancer survivors, a sleeve for women with swelling from lymphedema, prosthetic limb measurements for amputees, less awful hospital gowns, or even enhancements for NASA’s spacesuits. To achieve those goals, the lab uses surveys, interviews, and observations to learn the desires and needs of wearers. Then, they employ statistics, measurements, biomechanical analysis, and geometry to see how products interact with bodies. LaBat summarizes that learning, innovation, and feedback process in her new book, Human Body: A Wearable Product Designer’s Guide (CRC Press), written with colleague Dr. Karen Ryan. It is, essentially, an anatomy textbook for designers. Such research seems, suddenly, to be in demand. Mass-market apparel companies including Nike, Target, Tommy Hilfiger, and Zappos have recently launched lines of adaptive clothing for people with disabilities and anyone else who doesn’t tolerate “regular” clothing. This has long represented a niche market with high prices. Yet, globally, the market for adaptive clothing could reach $39.5 billion by 2026, according to analysis by Coherent Market Insights. This number sounds less surprising when one considers the fact that 12.6 percent of Americans have a disability. Linsey Griffin, an assistant professor and co-director of the HDL, explains that fit can prove surprisingly complicated. Griffin laid out that argument on the day of my visit, speaking to a group of students touring the lab. “When we’re talking about this design for all—being more inclusive—the fit is so integral to the work,” she says. “It’s crucial to health and livelihood and safety.”

I’d heard the same sentiment from a friend, Julie Guidry, who described how she learned to sew in order to modify her stepson’s clothes. In the past, she’d done so far as to cut the arm off a winter coat to reduce the bulk. Now, 27-year-old Caleb, who has a rare genetic disorder and is small in stature, often sports clothes from Target’s Cat and Jack adaptive clothing line. The drawstring or elastic waistbands can accommodate his feeding tube, for instance. They’re also designed to be sensory-friendly with flat seams and no tags.

“We appreciate that the clothes are age-appropriate for him—and COOL,” says Guidry. “Finally, something that looks hip and is comfortable.”

LaBat has understood needs such as Caleb’s for years. LaBat is showing me some of the galley proofs, which have been pinned to the divider that separates the scanner from the rest of the HDL room. As we talk—about fabrics, about design, about the Service is well-done.
A TURNING POINT.

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• Unfair severance
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• Corporate fraud
• Wrongful termination

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Confronting serious employment

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Taking a surgeon’s glove. One of the HDL’s current projects involves collecting better measurements of hands, for a variety of applications. By scanning hands in different poses—holding scissors, pinching a pencil—researchers can identify where crease lines fall. That helps designers to understand where to put seams in order to optimize the mobility of the glove. With better-fitting gloves, the HDL team hopes to extend the number of years that surgeons can work. Studies have shown that female surgeons experience shorter work lifespans, possibly due to ergonomic-related health problems. In general, operating tables and instruments have been designed for men’s sizes. (They’re also working with 13 other institutions on better-fitting gloves for firefighters.)

A new project to revamp adult incontinence garments uses similar technology. “Obviously that product is so close to the body that anything that is off about it becomes a hindrance to the wearer,” Griffin, HDL’s co-director, says. “Comfort, function, leakage issues—that is something that can really inhibit a person’s ability to live a normal life.”

She squats on a see-through box instead of a chair, which would block the under

GRABBING THE FUTURE FROM THE BEGINNING.

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