SUSTAINABILITY: PEOPLE AND SKILLS



Digital skills are needed on factory floors if textile manufacturers in Europe are to enjoy success in the future. Industry figures believe they have identified the skills gaps that need addressing most urgently and the European Commission is offering funding to help this 'upskilling' happen.

# Solutions for the big skills gap problem

A European Union project for promoting skills among people who work in the textile, clothing, leather and footwear (TCLF) industries came to a close in February at a special conference in Brussels. The Digital TCLF Industries project, which focused particularly on digital or information technology skills, had run for two years.

The European Apparel and Textile Confederation (EURATEX) co-ordinated the project and its director of innovation and skills, Lutz Walter, chaired the February conference. "Textile and clothing is a strategic sector in Europe," he said, "In 2017, across the 28 member states of the European Union, it employed 1.7 million people, so it's large. But if the companies that employ those people are to continue to compete, a transformation of the workplace is required between now and 2025 and that means digital skills are a must. You either digitise or you die, sooner or later," he explained.

He explains that among the project's main achievements were identifying the TCLF jobs most affected by this change and examining where the most important skills gaps are likely to be by 2025. "After that, it's a question of responding and teaching those skills," Mr Walter says, "and there is already financial support in place to help companies do that."

## Available money

The European Commission is in the process of agreeing its budgets for the next few years and the sum under consideration to help workers

*Automated cutting at an Inditex factory. Advanced technology and the skills to go with it are required for textiles manufacturing.*

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(across all sectors) advance in learning digital skills is €700 million. From this, using specifically money from Europe's Erasmus+ programme, follow-up initiatives for putting the findings of the Digital TCLF Industries project into effect have already begun. This new programme is called Skills4Smart TCLF and it will run for the next four years. All of this is a way of saying millions of euros are available to help European textile companies prepare for the future.

An expert on technology and sociology at the RWTH University in Aachen, Dr Andrea Altepost, says she has seen the digital skills gap at close quarters in the work her department does with German textile companies. Many of these operators are small and her observation is that more than half of their employees are more than 50 years old. "These are people who have not grown up with digital skills but are still ten or 15 years away from retirement," she explains. "What they do have, though, is specialist experience and knowledge of textile production. Therefore, what companies need to do is set up an exchange: teach these members of the workforce digital skills and encourage them to share what they know."

## Priorities emerge

Drilling down, nine broad areas of work across TCLF have emerged as priorities. Lutz Walter is at pains to emphasise that these are not necessarily job titles in their own right, but broader sets of skills that the organisations behind the initiatives will aim to focus on during the four years of Skills4Smart TCLF. A Milan-based consultancy, Spin 360, did the work to identify the nine areas. Its chief executive, Federico Brugnoli, says that, in his estimation, the areas that will be of greatest interest to textile manufacturers include those linking information technology to supply chain data management, product trend management, product lifecycle management and marketing.

"In the past," Mr Brugnoli says explaining the example of supply chain data management, "sourcing a product, component or material was a question of sending a fax to the supplier, receiving the product and checking its quality. Now lots more information is required, including the answers to social questions about that supplier." And when it comes to digital marketing, he says that the people working in this area are going to have to be able to understand "big data" and concepts such as predictive analytics. It is still a consumer-facing role, but not in the sense of having deep knowledge of the tastes of consumers in a specific country or city. "Big, international companies no longer pay much attention to where products are being purchased now," he says, "because everything is mixed. E-commerce has ended geo-localisation in marketing."

## Cast of thousands

Dr Laurent Zibell, a policy adviser at trade union organisation IndustriAll Europe, is another who has carried out research on this subject, engaging with more than 7,000 companies in the course of doing so. Across all of Spin 360's nine areas, and looking at all TCLF activity together, Dr Zibell concludes that these industries will have 42,000 workers to train in the next five years. "And the need at least to train the trainers and to plan the courses is immediate," he adds.

Commenting on these priorities, Mr Walter pointed out that no one involved in this endeavour has had the assistance of a crystal ball. There is no way of being certain how things will work out, and warns that, if they do



*There are skills gaps in areas such as supply chain data management, product trend management, product lifecycle management and marketing.*

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*More than 40,000 people currently working in textiles, clothing, leather and footwear in Europe will need training in new skills. Fortunately, there is money available from the European Commission to help pay for this.*

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work out "the way we think", he says it is clear there is a need to be ready. "The analysis is complicated, but if these figures are anywhere in the right ballpark, our training needs are really quite significant. The need is real and action is required."

## Knowledgeable people, new skills

IVOC Belgium is one of the organisations involved in addressing these training needs; it is a specialist human resources consultancy that focuses on fashion and garment manufacturing companies. IVOC director, Rob Senden, says the programmes that will come from Skills4Smart TCLF will improve the quality of training in textile, clothing, leather and footwear companies, enhancing employability and facilitating career development for people already working in the four sectors.

IVOC has interviewed 225 companies across all four. Mr Senden is quick to explain that skills mismatches exist because of a combination of factors, including the poor image the four industries often have among young people in the jobs market. Levels of pay and the need for mobility are other reasons people commonly quote for looking for work elsewhere. "Skills are part of a larger picture," he says. Simply upping sticks and moving operations to parts of the world where it might be easier to recruit is, he adds, something that has already been happening for decades and has fallen well short of providing finished product brands with a personnel panacea. Looking around the existing workforce and identifying good candidates for upskilling is likely to involve substantially less upheaval.

By the start of this year, IVOC had identified two broad areas of its own that it believes are particularly suited to upskilling: digital marketing functions and sustainability expertise. It emphasises that it does not mean these as job titles, but as broader areas of work in TCLF organisations.

Both areas seem likely to encompass jobs that large numbers of young people want to do; many have studied these subjects at university and gained impressive qualifications in marketing and in sustainability and environmental management. Rob Senden says this observation is true, but insists that young people coming out of university with these qualifications are choosing jobs in sectors outside TCLF. "It seems that our companies are not the kind of business these young people want to work in," he observes with a hint of sadness. "That's why the company leaders we have spoken to have almost given up trying to recruit them. They think training their own knowledgeable people to fulfil these roles is a better bet."

### Nine areas of work most impacted

- Supply chain data management
- Product trend management
- Product lifecycle management
- Process analytics
- Leather technologist
- Finishing technician
- Digital marketing
- R&D information research
- 3D footwear design and pattern-making

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