

The People Factor

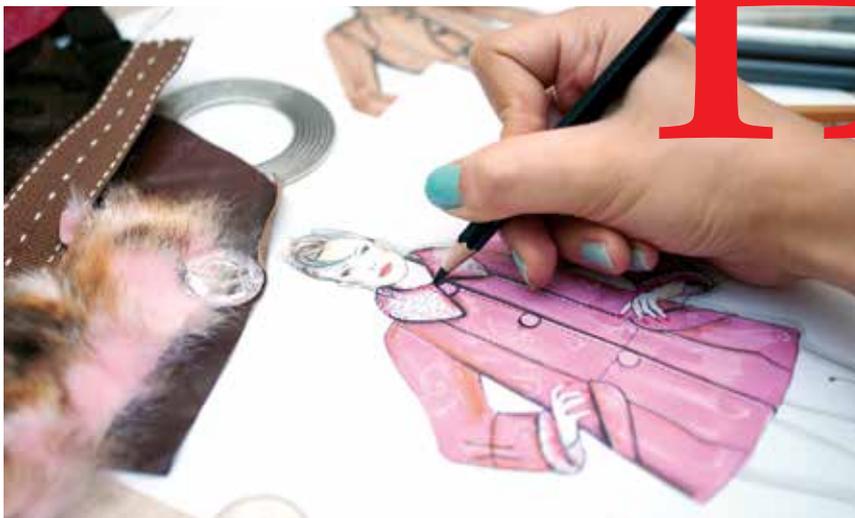
It's time to structure the industry from its very roots, namely, both undergraduate and vocational courses. **Bindu Gopal Rao** tells us why.



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ave you ever wondered how two businesses with similar capital structures and size seem so different from each other? Intellectual capital can very often be the key differentiator between two similar businesses. It is people who can make or break a business and often it is the very same people who can define the character of an organisation. In a people-centric business like apparel, people are vital and hold the key to an enterprise's success or lack of it.



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STAFFING EQUATIONS

Staffing requirements vary in the apparel industry and there is a need for category managers and brand managers. At the design level, fashion designers and graphic designers are required while merchandisers, garment technologists, sourcing personnel are required at the merchandising level. This apart, experts are required in the field of embroidery, printing and garment washing. At the marketing level, there is a need for

regional marketing executives and at the factory level, pattern developers, sampling unit managers, production planning person, production managers and quality control personnel are required. People are required across the board and on all levels in the apparel industry. “It begins with the trend forecasters who interpret, inspire, and predict shifts in fashion preferences. Textile product developers and designers use colours, textures, patterns, and finishes to create the foundation on which fashion products are built. In production, employees work together to manufacture the final product. Then, the promotion and sales personnel departments collaborate to generate an interest and create a desire among the retail buyers who purchase the products for the ultimate consumer. Then there are recourse managers in finance, accounting and human resource whose presence and importance are often overlooked by fashion professionals,” explains Rajiv Mehra, Director, Styleever.com, which is a leading online shopping portal.

EDUCATION MATTERS

The kind of courses available for those intending to join the textile industry include fashion designing, creative arts, merchandising, surface ornamentation



at the undergraduate level, and various other courses at the postgraduate level. "Otherwise you just need to tactfully handle the dealings of the industry with basic knowledge of technology and market," says designer Jaya Misra. Nowadays, multiple courses are available in every division of the apparel industry

as long as you have the urge to learn the multiple facets of the trade. "I think today's youth are very fashionable and have a penchant for creativity as compared to a few decades ago. They are keen to take admission in college courses to learn about the apparel industry and then explore their creativity post their graduation," says Mehra. "There is no specific apparel industry course except for fashion designing. Of course there are institutes that offer retail or fashion management but again that caters to the more generic profiles of organisation. Also, I do not think it can be industry specific. As we look at the structure, we realise that there is a wide range of skill sets required—from technical knowhow to purely managerial skills," says Manoj Mehra, CMD, Pret Study By Janak Fashions Pvt. Ltd. Mostly, all courses serve the purpose of training the top tier of the industry. "Unfortunately there are no vocational courses available to train and educate the hand embroiders, hand dyers, weavers and tailors on a large scale. Thus, the lower level, which is the backbone of the industry, is left uneducated and confined to their backward environments," says Sanya Dhir, Brand Director, KBSH.

INDUSTRY READINESS

Most of the academic courses offer 70 per cent theoretical and 30 per cent practical education. Nowadays, institutes are tying up with apparel industries to facilitate three to six months of industrial training to the students. So, for the students, the transition from college to industry becomes smoother. "While there are enough graduates coming out of these colleges, very few want to pursue a full-fledged career in the industry. For example, if a student learns stitching in a fashion production degree course, he/she will rarely want to pursue the same as a career (i.e. become a specialised tailor because of the easy availability of cheaper alternatives). There are various courses that are offered but the teachings are less in sync with the practical industry requirements, thus, the students are more theoretical in their knowhow instead of being equipped with the practical nuances of the job. Also, as mentioned earlier, the vocational knowledge lacks in terms of training the craftsmen for newer techniques and skills. There is no resource to educate or train them," says Dhir. Currently, the fashion industry relies more on mass market sales. The mass market caters to





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a wide range of customers, producing ready-to-wear garments using trends set by the established names of the fashion industry. “They often wait around a season to make sure a style is going to catch on before producing their own versions of the original look. Academics are more inclined towards the theoretical study of fashion, which may not go through much change over the years. Trends in fashion change but the basic theory of fashion remains the same. It is up to the designer to relate to both and manipulate theories to fit into the current trends,” says Anusha R, Head – Design and Sourcing, Cbazaar.com. Students usually adapt to the ‘follow the herd’ pattern and do not consider the prospective opportunities that professional international markets might provide. “With fashion constantly changing, a student needs to be proactive and adopt a course that will help add value to the industry and the concerned organisation in the near future,” says Varsha Bhawnani, Managing Director, Vinegar.



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OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

The lack of sharing capabilities of technological innovation and the lack of use of innovative technology in the apparel sector have been identified as major obstacles in the advancement of the world's apparel industry. When compared with other industries of the world, the global apparel industry has been far behind in research and development activities. Uncertainty is perhaps the biggest challenge that the apparel industry has been facing over the years. "The economic situation in Europe and the USA, unpredictable swings in commodity prices, labour shortages and rising costs, especially in China, all add up to the worry. We must have the right people designing the products. We must have the right people sourcing the products. We must be working with the right factories (people) and the factories must have enough of the right people sewing our products. We focus 70–90 per cent of our time on this one key area," says Misra. Challenges such as low wages, poor environment and illiteracy are leading to the silent death of the inherited craft as the newer generation is unwilling to pursue the same trade. As a result, the number of intricate handcraft



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artists is dwindling and industrialisation is taking over. According to Bhawnani, "Training is very subjective in every organisation. I believe if you get the right people on board, recruited from the accredited schools with careful scrutiny of their projects, even fresher's become quick learners and adapt easily to the patterns of an organisation. R

& D in this industry needs to be more aggressive and extensive to make the sail smoother for manufacturers." Based on McKinsey research, by 2015, the number of consuming class households will likely triple to 64 million. There is likely to be a linear correlation in terms of the number of people required to handle increased business volumes, which augurs well for the industry. ♣