



Solutions for the skills gap

Digital skills are needed on factory floors if leather and leathergoods 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 make this 'upskilling' happen.

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 conference in Brussels. The Digital TCLF Industries project, which focused 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, said at the start of the February conference: "TCLF is a strategic sector in Europe. In 2017, across the European Union, it employed 1.7 million people, so it's large. But if companies 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 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 (across all sectors) advance in 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.

Nine broad areas of work across TCLF have emerged as skills-gap priorities. Lutz Walter emphasises that these are not necessarily job titles in their own right, but broader sets of skills that the four years of Skills4Smart TCLF will focus on. Milan-based consultancy Spin 360 did the work to identify these nine groups of skills. Its chief executive, Federico Brugnoli, says

that, in his estimation, the areas that will be of greatest interest to leather manufacturers include those linking IT to supply chain data management, product trend management, product lifecycle management and marketing. Specifically, he said the role of the professional leather technologist has emerged as an area in which many leather producing companies need new talent.

The skills are needed

At the Brussels event, Gustavo González-Quijano, the secretary general of COTANCE, the leather industry's representative body in the European Union, confirmed that the money available can, among other things, help leather technologists learn these skills. All a company has to do, he said, is set up a formal project to bring these skills into the organisation, go through the formal application process and the financial help can be theirs.

He said the changing role of the leather technologist is one of the areas affected by the digital skills gap because of the advanced technology now integrated into tanning machinery. As well as deep knowledge of how to make leather, technologists now need the digital skills that will allow them to use the new equipment to maximum effect. Mr González-Quijano's view is that, in this case at least, the skills gap is relatively narrow. "The perception among companies is that leather technologists will need a relatively low level of digital skills, but the point is that they are going to have to learn those skills; tannery owners want them and they are needed."

He points out that Europe's strength in this area is in having training institutions that can teach these skills. A weakness, for leather and for all TCLF companies in Europe, is that it's hard to attract young people into these industries.

Old skills, new workers

There is talent around. At Opcalia, a Paris-based training organisation that has worked extensively and successfully with the French leather sector, project manager for digital training, Stéphanie Bertrand,

says initiatives such as the luxury leathergoods production facility that Sofama set up in Yssingaux in the Haute-Loire region of France in 2012 show how transferrable some key skills are. Lingerie brand Lejaby decided to close its factory in that part of the country and Sofama was able to take on a large part of the workforce. The workers were mostly women whose skills in handling, cutting and stitching expensive and delicate materials were at an advanced level. For Sofama, training these workers to apply these skills to leather instead of fabric was to push against an open door. In 2010, Sofama, which manufactures finished products as a specialist outsource partner of most of the big-name luxury brands, had 140 employees; now it has 600.

Lateral thinking

"Sometimes it helps to think of skills in blocks," Ms Bertrand says. "Without question, the former Lejaby workers already had many of the blocks that Sofama needed and, instead of it taking two years to bring them up to the required level, in this case it took six months."

Opcalia is seldom able to work directly with the major luxury brands; their in-house training schools are strong and well resourced. They have what Stéphanie Bertrand regards as a big advantage in attracting new recruits. "They're such important brands that young people view it as prestigious to work for them. That's why they have been able to set up successful production centres in places like Franche-Comté in the east of France, a relatively remote area."

Another idea she has is for leathergoods brands to look at areas in which other employers are recruiting and she mentions Cholet in the west of France as a good example. Tyre manufacturer Michelin has expanded its factory there, attracting workers from other regions. It is an area that has a strong tradition in garment manufacture and, although clothing companies could not compete in terms of attractiveness and levels of pay with Michelin, they were successful in recruiting people who moved to Cholet with Michelin's new recruits. ●