



Skills council plots path ahead

Exactly a year after its foundation, a special skills group comprising representatives of the textile, clothing and leather industries in Europe, has come up with seven recommendations for what the European Commission, national governments, education providers and manufacturers in the sector can do to enhance skills, preserve traditional know-how and create new jobs.

A skills gap in traditional industries in Europe, including leather and leathersgoods manufacturing, has developed as a consequence of so much production moving to lower-cost economies in the past two decades and because many of the workers that remain are nearing retirement age, with few young people choosing to follow in their footsteps.

To address these problems, the European Commission announced funding in December 2011 for a special skills council, made up of the representative bodies in Brussels for the tanning sector (COTANCE), the textile and clothing industries (Euratex) and a trade union federation that represents workers in these areas of the European economy, industriAll. Twelve months on, the Commission was keen to learn what the skills council has achieved in its first year, so it invited training providers, manufacturers, media and other industry observers to Brussels on December 12 to hear about success stories that have come to light so far and proposals for the years ahead.

The three organisations that make up the skills council each spoke extensively at the conference. The Commission's Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities was also represented, as were industry skills providers (ISPs) from Italy, France, the UK and Belgium, who each gave a presentation to explain the work they have done since the initiative began.

Tanneries at the ballet

The Italian ISP was the Osservatorio Nazionale Concia, which has a specific focus on the tanning sector in Italy. The Milan-based organisation's Silvia Pedrana gave a presentation outlining activities in its first year of existence, which have included a series of open days at tanneries in different parts of Italy, an art competition in which students used leather donated by Italian tanneries to compose pictures, a book for children called La Pelle (leather)

and even a ballet, for which all the costumes were made of leather. Ms Pedrana said that all of this has helped the Italian tanning sector, which she numbered at 1,300 companies and 18,000 employees, to present itself in a prestigious light.

One of the social partner representatives leading the event, Luc Triangle of industriAll, said that 2.5 million people in the European Union work in textiles, clothing and leather at the moment (if Turkey were to join the European Union, the number would immediately double, he added). In contrast the chemicals industry in the 27 member states employs 1.6 million people. "So we have more people," he said, "but there is no comparison between our sectors and chemicals in terms of image. The image most young people in Europe seem to have of textile, clothing and leather is that there is no future for us."

New-generation workers

Clearly, correcting this perception is one of the objectives of the skills council's work. And in a presentation from an ISP from the United Kingdom, Creative Skillset, conference delegates received news of good examples of young people being persuaded to look at the three industries with fresh eyes and consider them as a career choice. The presentation mentioned an initiative among high-end knitwear manufacturers in the Scottish Borders, and one of the speakers, Annie Warburton, later talked about the success luxury leathersgoods brand Mulberry has had with a similar idea in south-west England. When senior people from Mulberry first began to talk to students in local schools about joining its in-house apprenticeship programme a few years ago, they overheard a teacher telling students at the end of the talk that it should spur them on to work hard and pass their exams, Ms Warburton recalled. Any student who did badly could expect to end up at Mulberry, was the teacher's message, making it sound like the worst turn any young life could take.

"But look at it now," she said. "Mulberry has built a second factory in Bridgewater

and the apprenticeship programme is a great success. They want to make more leathersgoods in the UK."

Luc Triangle said other examples of high-end leathersgoods and footwear brands taking steps to train new craftspeople in their domestic markets (Hermès in Charente, Repetto in Dordogne, Loewe in Madrid) offered great encouragement, and he said companies needed to continue with these initiatives. "It's not only up to us to solve the skills needs of these industries," he said. "The challenge is to companies as well."

Job creation

According to another of the ISP presenters, Rob Senden from Belgian organisation IVOC, the loss of jobs in the European Union may have affected leather less in recent years than textiles and clothing. He quoted figures relating to 2010 for leather and to 2011 for the other two industries. The 2.5 million jobs Mr Triangle mentioned break down as follows, according to the IVOC director's figures. Clothing employed 1.1 million people in the EU in 2011 and textiles 700,000. The figure for leather in 2010 was 400,000 employees. Small and medium enterprises dominate very clearly; Mr Senden said the average number of employees in the companies active in the three sectors was between 10 and 16. "In textiles and clothing, the loss of employment was about 5% per year between 2006 and 2011," he said. "But in leather, the evolution of the employment situation has been much less drastic. There was a loss of employment in the build-up to the big year of the crisis, 2009, but since then there has been a recovery. The tanning sector in Italy has increased its number of employees by 6% in the last two years."

No 'I' in research and development

French ISP Opcalia mainly focused on the subject of innovation in its presentation. This drew several comments from the floor, with the consensus that research, development and innovation in



the EU should generate production jobs in the EU. Milan-based consultant, Federico Brugnoli, pointed out that too many research projects end in "a kind of valley of death" because they are projects that are "so ambitious they never find a way onto the market". He insisted that references just to research and development should stop and that the focus now has to be on research, development and innovation. "Market feasibility is the key, not technical feasibility," he said, "and it's innovation that will help us exploit market feasibility. We don't want our ideas to remain on paper or in a cemetery for prototypes."

Also speaking from the floor, the chief executive of French leather and footwear testing and training centre CTC, Yves Morin, agreed. He said: "In our industries we talk less and less about research and development; now, it's all about innovation. Innovation is part of the DNA of our industries. Companies are creating new ideas and new products, using new materials, all the time. That's why France and Italy are leaders in niche markets such as luxury leathersgoods."

Seven recommendations

At the end of the event, the secretary-

general of COTANCE, Gustavo González-Quijano, announced a series of seven recommendations that the skills council now wants to present to the European Commission, to national governments and to the textile, clothing and leather industries in Europe.

It wants funding to continue so that the council can carry on its work with adequate resources (although Mr González-Quijano emphasised that this should take place without any loss of autonomy). He explained that the European Commission had put a ceiling of €300,000 on the funding it will make available to the initiative in each of its first three years, but he made it clear that the skills council believes it will still have work to do when three years are up. "The level of support is still to be discussed," he added. "It depends on the initiatives we can launch, and there are also some possibilities for co-funding from national authorities. We think the amount of money we can generate by launching project proposals is quite significant."

Next he called on ISPs to set up national networks to help more EU companies in the three sectors become good sources of employment in the future. The skills council is also keen to support the creation of more ISPs across Europe, particularly in Germany, Portugal, Spain and other countries that have been less involved so far. He then recommended that the European Commission use the skills council to make sure sharing of information on skills promotion goes to all parts of the Commission itself.

The fourth recommendation was that people involved in promoting skills in textile, clothing and leather should also tap into the work of other sectors, to set up what he called "inter-sectoral transnational projects". This was followed by the insistence that there have to be good communications strategies, with young people in mind so as to bring a new generation of workers into the three industries.

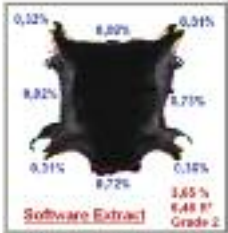
Mr González-Quijano's sixth recommendation was that all organisations involved in making training available to textile, clothing and leather workers, including schools, universities and training providers, should work together to create "a model of excellence" in technical training. And finally, he said all stakeholders should make a commitment to lifelong learning. "Things evolve all the time," he said, "and new knowledge brings new possibilities for companies and workers." ☉



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