



Sustainability: Getting the numbers right

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Many companies in all parts of the leather industry are looking at the age profile of their employees. In many instances they have a large cohort of employees who will retire between now and 2020. The demographic challenge being faced by many companies with large numbers of these people and the ongoing restructuring in the industry are just two of the current challenges creating the need for more

well trained staff throughout the leather sector.

The search to find new staff is not as easy as in the past. Normally appropriately trained staff move forward from the next generation, and so business goes on in an endless cycle. This time it is not so easy. While the generation that is coming up to retirement is a large one, the next in line generation of employees is small by comparison and does not have the numbers and skills to fill all of the gaps. The outcome is that the generation born roughly between 1980 and 2000 will have to move quickly into senior positions.

Furthermore the "leather industry" is bigger than it used to be. Heightened interest in supply, quality, traceability, end of life and environmental matters means that companies involved in using and supplying leather from all areas in the value chain are now looking for staff with some level of technical knowledge of leather.

This fits with the changing needs for skills in the market place. New jobs are being created as skills in testing, auditing, environmental and corporate social responsibilities (CSR) and added to those of being able to make a good piece of leather.

And "making a good piece of leather" is much more complex than it used to be as standards are tighter. Expensive raw material and penalty clauses in contracts also mean rejects are not tolerated, and the demand for more advanced products is relentless.

Innovation is needed, and with innovation also comes the role of longer term research. This is vital for an industry such as leather which is based on an irregular by-product from another industry, and as a consequence produces high levels of solid and liquid waste that demand specialised treatment.

As the industry restructures and new large well-funded groups come into play we can expect some research to move back towards the tanneries; new partnerships will be formed with colleges and chemical companies. New end uses for leather, the challenge of ever improving alternatives, the fast moving demands of both fashion and technical leathers all demand new product development, medium term innovation, and the demand for new skills.

The departure of the leather industry from much of Europe and North America in the last part of the twentieth century - and the careless use of terms such as "heavy metals" and "toxic chemicals" when tanning is discussed - has also slowed the interest of young people to enter the industry. This is despite good job opportunities. Attempts to reverse this are bearing fruit but are a slow, demanding task.



Information is readily available for students on the internet, as well as specific information generated both within ICLT, the University and other selected sources.



Understanding the properties and behaviour of leather are paramount as leather is increasingly made to standards set by materials engineers, such as the requirements demanded of automotive leathers.

Already we are seeing a short-fall in the supply of skilled technicians that are required to meet the demand both at senior technician level and at a lower supervisory level. Leather using companies have the same problem with senior technicians through to the key level of leather cutters. A new generation needs training in the next few years so that the skills of an ancient craft and a modern technology do not get lost.

The Institute for Creative Leather Technologies (ICLT), at the University of Northampton, has recognised this skills gap within the industry. Accordingly, it has restructured the delivery of courses with the aim of producing industry ready graduates. Close collaboration with the global supply chain, ranging from abattoirs to end users, has helped identify the market needs.

Historically the Institute has delivered the science and technology of leather making to students from all around the world. However, it is now widely known that global issues can cause problems, as opposed to problems just associated with leather manufacture and the sectors that make use of those leathers.



In addition to the science, an understanding of the practicalities of leather making and the changing tactile properties as the leather progresses step-by-step from the raw skin to the finished leather can be gained in the pilot tannery.



ICLT is not a department in isolation, and education extends into a range of other subject matter – business studies, environmental, fashion, marketing and psychology within the University.

Therefore, in order to maintain a sustainable industry, it is imperative that graduates today are aware of current global issues, and this might include events that do not originate from within the leather industry. These might include, for example, the effects of growth of the global population, changes in animal feed and husbandry, the demise of the Amazon forest and changes in global weather patterns, CSR, and new technical innovation in the production of leather products.

We are also facing a changing student, and today's student does not expect to be spoon fed the facts. Today, they have ready access to information on the internet so classroom delivery takes on a very different picture. Modes of delivery now incorporate social media discussion boards, blogs, tutorials and group sessions looking at applying knowledge to commercial situations.

The ability within education to address these changing demands, close collaborations with industry, and an understanding of the ever changing market pressures, all support the sustainability of this high value industry. 🌱



Insight into the technical demands within the manufacture of footwear, clothing, leather goods and accessories, and changing requirements due to new design and fashion need taking into account.

COURTESY: BECKY SAMPSON, GRADUATE OF ICLT, WHO NOW HAS HER OWN LABEL "SAMPSON & CHRISTIE".