

Innovative clothing companies more capable in implementing sustainability

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Companies with a great capacity for innovation turn out to be more dedicated to improving social sustainability aspects. This is the conclusion drawn by Harrie van Bommel, a University of Twente PhD candidate who was awarded his doctorate last week. Over the last few years, Van Bommel has investigated the sustainability strategies of clothing companies, looking at both social and environmental aspects. His investigation focused on the question as to why companies in this industry who seek to improve sustainability aspects within their supply networks tend to employ different strategies.

Social sustainability aspects

One of the key social aspects in this industry is working conditions at suppliers' factories, which are often located in low-wage countries. The extent to which companies seek to improve sustainability aspects turned out to be mainly determined by their understanding of recent developments and trends in the industry, and by their willingness to discuss and address sensitive issues. In addition, it was found that the companies' experience of inter-departmental and interdisciplinary collaboration, as

well as their collaboration with other companies in the supply network, were vital contributing factors. The study therefore recommends that clothing companies and their employees or future employees should be supported in improving these aspects.

In addition to pressuring clothing companies with factories in low-wage countries into adopting corrective measures, civil society organizations could collaborate with them in actual projects designed to improve the status quo. Education, too, could contribute to this process, by making students more aware of the sustainability aspects to be considered in the industry, and also by teaching them to co-operate with others in interdisciplinary and international partnerships, training them to keep an open mind with regard to societal issues. As a product of this kind of education, future employees of clothing companies could help change the clothing industry from within and make it more sustainable.

The environment and companies' capacity for innovation

With regard to environmental aspects, the study found no significant link with companies' capacity for innovation. The study found that strategies to improve environmental aspects are developed differently from strategies to improve social aspects. For instance, whether or not a company decides to sell more products made of organic cotton or to start collecting used clothes in their shops for recycling purposes is largely determined by other actors and factors. For example, a proposal to use recycled materials for a new fashion collection may be rejected by a company's marketing department on the grounds that recycling has a bad reputation in the fashion and clothing industry.

Decisions on other environmental aspects, such as reducing the number of hazardous substances

used and promoting the purification of the waste water used in the textile-dyeing process, are largely determined by technological concerns and financial feasibility. If the clothing industry is to be made more sustainable in terms of environmental aspects, we will need more than technological advance – as well as different business and revenue models. First and foremost, society will have to become more accepting of the use of sustainable (recycled) materials.

More information: Sustainability strategies in industrial supply networks: an innovation approach concerning environmental and social aspects in the clothing industry.

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