**Fashion & Collaboration – A study of the Changing Roles**

**Abstract**

***“It is not the strongest among the species that survive. Nor is it the most intelligent. It’s those that are most adaptive to change.”- Charles Darwin***

Change seems to be the only constant in today’s global. How can you manage it? How can you keep up with it?Innovation, creativity and collaboration are the key to success in the fashion industry.

In today’s Intelligent World, collaborations are necessary for any business that wants to become leaders in their fields. It is one part of how small companies can do so much more; that they can actually operate as much larger companies… they can “Play Big”. Common factors and characteristics have been identified by research as influencing the collaborative process, which includes the skills of leadership, communication, sustainability, unity, participation, and a history of successful accomplishments (Hogue, 1995; Keith 1993). Borden (1997) has identified four factors: internal communication, external communication, membership, and goal setting**.[[1]](#footnote-1)**

The IT industry has recognized collaboration is the way of the future and there is a strong move to create products which seek to improve productivity by virtual communications and business processes. These types of tools enable geographically dispersed teams to come together for virtual meetings allowing for time and cost savings, less travel, and improved communications flow.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**India** is one of the prime sourcing hubs for Fashion Apparel and the need for technical collaboration with the foreign buyers is the key area to be addressed. The survey study focused on understanding the role of collaboration between the Foreign Apparel Buyers and the Fashion Apparel Export manufacturing factories in Delhi/NCR in the existing business environment, the areas desired for effective collaboration and the tools that can be used to make it happen.

***Keywords: Fashion, Collaboration, Apparel, Virtual, Communications.***

**1. Introduction**

*“In* ***the long history of humankind (and animal kind, too) those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed***.”- **Charles Darwin.**

Globalization has been promoted by industrial and commercial firms alike. These firms have established two distinct types of international economic networks that have been called "producer-driven" and "buyer-driven" global commodity chains, respectively (Gereffi, 1994; 1999). A commodity chain refers to the whole range of activities involved in the design, production, and marketing of a product (see Gereffi and Korzeniewicz, 1994 for an overview of this framework; a closely related global value chain approach is highlighted in Gereffi and Kaplinsky, 2001). [[3]](#footnote-3)

The IT industry has recognized that collaboration is the way of the future and there is a strong move to create products which seek to improve productivity by virtualizing communications and business processes. There is easy access to tools such as video and teleconferencing, chat, bulletin boards and email - simple tools which enable groups to communicate. Many tools are readily available as open source software or at low costs making them accessible to all sectors. These types of tools enable geographically dispersed teams to come together for virtual meetings allowing for time and cost savings, less travel, and improved communications flow. Therefore, technical supply chain competency is now perceived as a qualifier and relational competence is seen as the winner.

**2. Literature Review**

**2.1 Collaboration**

Collaboration is a process of participation through which people, groups and organizations work together to achieve desired results. Common factors and characteristics have been identified by research as influencing the collaborative process, which include the skills of leadership, communication, sustainability, unity, participation, and a history of successful accomplishments (Hogue, et al, 1995; Keith et.al, 1993).[[4]](#footnote-4)

**2.1.1 Collaboration in Business**

Collaboration in business can be found both inter and intra organization and ranges from the simplicity of a partnership and crowd funding to the complexity of a [multinational corporation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multinational_corporation). Collaboration between team members allows for better communication within the organization and throughout the supply chains. It is a way of coordinating different ideas from numerous people to generate a wide variety of knowledge. Collaboration with a selected few firms as opposed to collaboration with a large number of different firms have been shown to positively impact firm performance and innovation outcomes. The recent improvement in technology has provided the world with high speed internet, wireless connection, and web-based collaboration tools like blogs, and wikis, and has as such created a "mass collaboration." People from all over the world are efficiently able to communicate and share ideas through the internet, or even conferences, without any geographical barriers.

**2.1.2Collaboration is a strategic partnership**

A collaborative agreement and/or a relationship between two or more companies or organizations formed to pursue a set of agreed upon goals while remaining independent companies or organizations. (Business Building - "Strategic Alliances and Their Powerful Benefits" by Glenn Ebersole). The most clear and powerful benefits of developing and working with strategic collaborative increases and enhances the credibility and image of the organization.[[5]](#footnote-5) There is access to new skills, knowledge, and experience greater resources than those of your own company. This also leads more competitive purchasing, supply deals and enhanced marketing and sales efforts. Indeed, adds value as well as extra benefits to clients/customers and leverage from another company or organization's recognized. Collaboration on larger and more complex projects and programs increases market penetration.

**2.1.3 IT enabled tools for Collaboration**

Due to the complexity of today's business environment, collaboration in technology encompasses a broad range of tools that enable groups of people to work together including social networking, instant messaging, team spaces, web sharing, audio conferencing, video, and telephony. Broadly defined, any technology that facilitates linking of two or more humans to work together can be considered a collaborative tool.[[6]](#footnote-6) Many large companies are developing enterprise collaboration strategies and standardizing on a collaboration platform to allow their employees, customers and partners to intelligently connect and interact. Collaborative groups often work together in the same environment may also utilize information technology –collaborative software in particular—to overcome geographic limitations. As a group works to meet its goals, the following components should be included to sustain effective collaboration.

**2.2 The Fashion Apparel Commodity Chain**

The apparel commodity chain is organized around five main segments: raw material supply, including: natural and synthetic fibers; the provision of components, such as the yarns and fabrics manufactured by textile companies; production networks made up of garment factories, including their domestic and overseas subcontractors; the export channels established by trade intermediaries; and marketing networks at the retail level. Each of these segments in the apparel commodity chain encompasses a variety of differences in terms of factors such as geographical location, labor skills and conditions, technology, and the scale and type of enterprises. These characteristics also affect the distribution of power and profits throughout the commodity chain.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**2.2.1 The Fashion Apparel Exports –India**

Business standards have reported that Indian exports have grown by 42% compared to the same period (June) last year, with cotton t-shirts and shirts leading the way. In rupee terms, the exports have increased by 36.86% in June 2011-12 over the same month of previous fiscal. In the first three months of the financial year 2011-12, apparel exports have reached US$ 3.581 billion (approx. Rs. 19,337 crore) at a growth rate of 34.47% against the corresponding period last year.[[8]](#footnote-8) In the past, India did not tap into its apparel manufacturing exports potential to the fullest. The Global trend to manufacture and source products in low cost countries (LCCs) necessitates Indian apparel manufacturers to collaborate to improvise. India has the potential to become second largest exporters among LCCs. China is more cost competitive in basic garments whereas, India can compete with China through value addition and delivering low volume –high value exports in high fashion segment.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**2.2.2 Specialty Retailers: Sourcing Strategies**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Retailer** | Sales | Private-label sourcing | Description & Known Countries |
| **Gap** | 14.5 | Direct Sourcing | 900 vendors in 60 countries, china 27%; U.S, 3 %.Others: Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Philippines, Jordan, Vietnam, Cambodia (Gap is the largest buyer), Morocco, Turkey and India. |
| H&M | 13.1 | Direct Sourcing | 20 offices (10 each in Europe & Asia); relationship factories:60% Asia (incl. Bangladesh, Pakistan, Cambodia)and 40% Europe (2007) |
| Limited Brands Inc | 9.0 | Own Intermediary | Own MAST Industries 9 agent, contract manufacturing, and devise manufacturing facilities in 35 countries in Asia (Sri Lanka), Europe, S. America, Africa. |
| Abercrombie & Fitch | 3.5 | Direct Sourcing | Domestic Importer: uses Mast industries; relationships with 38 countries in Asia and Central and south America. |
| Talbots | 2.4 | Intermediary: Li & Fung |  |
| Aeropostale | 1.9 | Direct Sourcing | >67% business with five vendors |
| Gymboree | 1.0 | Intermediary: Li & Fung |  |

Table.1 :Sales are for 2008 from ( Apparel‘s top 50 2009);Talbot’s (Euromonitor, 2009)[[10]](#footnote-10)

The Gap, and The Limited, generally design and/or market—but do not make—the branded products they order. They are "manufacturers without factories" that separates the physical production of goods from the design and marketing stages of the production process (Gereffi, 1994). These retailers or marketers play the pivotal roles in setting up decentralized production networks. This pattern of trade led industrialization has become common in labor-intensive, consumer goods industries such as garments, footwear, toys, handicrafts, and consumer electronics. Tiered networks of third world contractors that make finished goods for foreign buyers carry out production. Large retailers or marketers that order the goods supply the specifications.

**2.2.3 Various models of buying & sourcing from India**

The traditional agent –sourcing model is most popular with buyers that require smaller volumes or larger buyers that need small quantities of certain items. Benefits of using a third party sourcing agent include scale of operations, buying power, flexibility, and agility.

Alternately, as buyers developed expertise in assessing local capabilities and their companies had sufficient resources, they started to establish direct sourcing relationships. To reduce cost and mitigate risk, many buyers established overseas sourcing offices in their main producing countries. Over the years retailers shifted more responsibilities to these overseas sourcing offices, driven by cost and the skills of the staff based in these offices.

**2.3 In world of Fast Fashion i.e. Fashion on Demand. Products change from month to month rather than season** **to season**. Over 10k new products per year are produced for a typical brand retailer. New Product introduction once a week & 3-5 weeks of final design to sales cycle. This imposes tremendous pressure to the supply chain. The challenges for the industry has increased, the production cycle time is continuing to be shortened. The emerging manufacturers give a fierce competition in terms of cost. The production order quantities are low and the product life cycle is shorter. The last minute changes require the manufacturer to be highly flexible, responsiveness & reliable. This leads to fragmented industry, lacking of consistent operational practices and are heavily relying on manual base operations.

Faster fashion requires lower turnaround time, forcing a trade off with LCC sourcing. Uncoupling supply from demand has traditionally helped companies gain cost advantages in manufacturing from low cost locations and shipping in high batch sizes[[11]](#footnote-11).

**2.3.1 The study by “**The global Apparel Value Chain, Trade and the Crisis, Challenges and opportunities for the Developing Countries by Gary Gereffi, Stacey Frederick (The world Bank Development Research Group, Trade and Integration Team April 2010” shows that each **brands determine their own sourcing strategy. However the pre –production stages essential for an apparel exporter manufacturer do not change, the process of approvals remain the same for each style on order.**

**2.3.2 The Approval Process- before bulk production**

1. The manufacturer is provided with a preliminary specification file with details of the garment that is to be manufactured.
2. The supplier within a short period of time formally acknowledges their understanding of the requirements in writing.
3. Before apparel production begins the buyer approves all components that will comprise the finished product.
4. Some buyers will require review of all trimming and others will require the approval of major trim components only.
5. Here are a few examples of items that may need to be submitted for review.

* Lab dips, strike offs (screen printed swatches), reeling of yarn in all colors.
* Production fabric, knit downs, handlooms, etc. Most often required in a large enough size to contain full pattern repeat.
* Care labels & main labels
* Clothing Components: Buttons, lace, zippers, interlinings, shoulder pads, elastics, hangers, hangtags, price tickets, etc.
* Packaging: ASN labels, chip board, jet clips, tissue paper, poly bags, etc.

**VI**. In addition to trimming, required to submit are

* Fit Samples
* Pre-production garment samples
* Testing samples
* TOP Samples (Top of Production Samples), etc.

**VII.** Most product development consists of a multi-step process that must be completed before finished goods are produced. The common steps in the product development process are:

* Product Review Meeting
* Submission of Trimming & Components
* Fit Testing: This process is to both monitor the manufacturer and to make sure the original size spec developed was correct. Some companies will conduct the fit testing on live fit models and others will do the testing in fit forms (mannequins). The size is advised to the supplier. Some companies will review only one size, and others like to review the smallest and largest size e.g. if production will be ordered in a scale including small thru double XL, they may require one sample in size small and one in XXL for the fit review.
* Photo Samples: Some retailers require photo samples. These samples are used for developing catalogs or advertising.
* Performance Testing: It is normal practice to have both fabric and garments tested before product is delivered. The testing often involves a third party testing facility such as Intertek, MTL, and SGS etc...

***In current scenario product strategy and life cycle* d**ecisions are the critical element that influence the design of the supply chain of apparel and the desired is ***“Speed to market”***

To Accelerate and earn its wings as an accelerator, an organization that lay stress on speed to market i.e. fast fashion must excel at the following:

* Well- defined business processes and procedures to cluster product development functions
* Use of technology enablers , linked to business strategy
* Lead time optimization –Understanding what propels styles to market

The enabler is Technology and has been making its presence felt in every aspect of process, starting from design to production and delivery at store .For some retailers the Product life cycle management (PLM) has gone beyond line adoption to sourcing, costing, order tracking and logistics. Although PLM applications support design and development processes, enabling tight integration with merchandising, assortment planning and line planning, and sourcing, their value is realized by integrating PLM with upstream planning and downstream execution systems.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Video conferencing with rich interaction and meeting support is another tool that organizations can employ for real time collaboration with suppliers .The video conferencing with its suppliers can be used for fit approval at various stages of the production process. **IT enabled collaborative effort is required to Combat Challenges of Fashion & now Fast Fashion.**

**3. Research Methodology:**

The focus of my study was centered on understanding the role of collaboration between the Foreign Apparel Buyers and the Fashion Apparel Export manufacturing factories in Delhi/NCR. I survey study included interviews with two direct sourcing offices ,five Intermediary offices i.e. the buying agencies & 20 medium to large scale apparel manufacturing units in Delhi/NCR to find out the level of collaboration present in the existing business environment, the areas desired for effective collaboration and the tools that can be used to make it happen.

**4. Findings and Analysis:**

**The questions asked at the** Interviews conducted with two direct sourcing offices, five Intermediary offices i.e. the buying agencies and & 20 medium to large scale apparel manufacturing units in Delhi/NCR, the response was as follows:

***a) Technical training*** is sometimes provided for the technician at the buying offices, the direct sourcing offices sometimes attend seminars and workshops if budget permits, whereas the manufacturer/ supplier teams are not involved in such trainings. Neither do the manufacturers /suppliers get these trainings by the local offices

***b) Buyers team travel for technical training*** in the sourcing hub ….the teams from overseas office may or may not, there is no such agenda which is part the sourcing strategy

***c) Approvals of lab dips/ trims /fit samples & fit sessions when asked if it*** was necessary to send everything to the buyer’s for approval, The response was that this has been happening for the last 30 years and nothing seems to change in the process .this also results in delays and eventually loss of money for both the parties.

***d) When asked if they are equipped to fit samples at the manufacturing base.*** Most of the respondents were confident that they understand the buyers & the fit of the buyers having worked with them for more than ten years & can approve what the buyer wants.

***e) The reason that the buyers want all should be approved @ their overseas Head office.***The response was mostly that the trust and acceptability is missing, which in some cases when the buyer is new to the market could be a genuine reason. Whereas, when the direct sourcing offices & buying agents of 15-20 years are involved is not the case.

***One*** of the reasons expressed that the customer in the selling countries has different sensibility than the people working in the sourcing country; they do not have the same approach …hence the process remains the same i.e. sending everything to the head office

***Second*** reason expressed was that the buyer has to see and approve the collection in the totality with the complete story where the product is going to sit with and sell, hence the need.

***The consensus*** was that no buyer has time to see and approve the collection in the totality with the complete story where the product is going to sit with and sell; hence this theory is not acceptable.

***f) Have some buyers allowed some stages to be approved here in India –by the liaison office or by the buying office staff?***

For some basic collection items the delegation of limited approvals have been sanctioned specific to low end buyers , however fashion collection the buyers want to see all the stages in their respective head offices and give directions for approvals or non approvals

***g) Re- final Inspection before allowing to ship -How is it conducted?***

i) Self Inspection – None

ii) Buying office /liaison office Auditor - mostly

iii) Third party - some

***h)The final Self Inspection is the best mode:*** most of the offices – suppliers /buying office personals /direct sourcing offices personals – all felt that this is the best way , The manufacturer as it is liable for penalties if any e.g. in case of wrong fit./colour/packing /delay …..even if the final inspection which is A RANDOM inspection conducted by any mode as stated above

***i) Tools are being used to expedite the processes in the supply chain –***

The sourcing offices & buying offices use the Skype & Videos conferencing to discuss various issues with the overseas Head offices, however, the suppliers (manufacturers) are discouraged to do the same

**5. Conclusions and suggestions**

**Easy and effective communication with suppliers:** Suppliers are now based in a variety of different countries (often in different time zones and with language issues) it is imperative that communication with these suppliers is as easy and effective as possible. The typical approach of phone, fax and email with some uncoordinated spreadsheets does not suffice in today’s complex supply chain. An automatic, fast and effective mechanism is in place , where the supplier can receive details of the latest specifications and perform remote plan updates, without the need to manually retype production information.

Various software are available in the market to provides complete supply chain visualization including critical path tracking, effective planning of both own production and fully sourced products including materials requirements planning and full supplier collaboration facilities.

Such software’s are focused on the three key elements that can help ensure that a sourcing company is in control of its extended supply chain:

* Integrated Planning (critical path, capacity and materials management)
* Visibility of order status with an automatic alert of problems
* Easy and effective communication with suppliers

**Whereas, the IT enabled tools are required to increase the collaboration at the approval stages to expedite the process & enable the further collaboration, the tools available and some currently use are:**

* The photo spectrometer for colour lab dip approvals, thou send to buyers for final approvals.
* E-fit Simulator by TUKA is used by few buyers /manufacturer , this is a clothing simulation tool for designers, pattern makers and manufacturers. You can present your style decisions, test the fit of a garment, or have a fit session with people all over the globe, e-fit is an easy-to-use and accurate virtual sample making tool. The same patterns used to cut actual samples are used by e-fit Simulator, and the virtual fit models are created using body scan data of real fit models. This is used for creating the right fit before sending the samples to the buyers.
* Whereas, if the buyers & manufacturers **collaborate and train together the sample approval process would stop at only sending the final fit sample rather than sending samples at all stages**
* 3D in Apparel Design - Three decades ago, three-dimensional (3D) technology use in the fashion industry was limited to a few adventurous manufacturers and was largely dismissed by the apparel sector. Today, pressure in the apparel market to produce more collections under shorter lead times has led to a veritable 3D revolution affecting the industry as a whole. Cost reduction, enhanced creativity, and improved communication are only the beginning of what 3D technology has to offer this complex and dynamic market.[[13]](#footnote-13)

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