FASHION-TECH: FUTURE RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES AND ASSESSMENT OF EMERGING TALENT

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Abstract

Today's Fashion-Tech landscape is in a state of flux – fashion and tech sectors are becoming increasingly more closely aligned, digitization is key, and environmental issues are driving new processes and agendas within the industry [1] Accordingly, the Fashion-Tech industry is identifying *new* job profiles and *interdisciplinary* roles connected to *sustainability*, *design*, *product innovation*, *entrepreneurship*, *manufacturing*, *data analysis*, *management* and *governance*, *policy making*, *omnichannel* and *e-commerce*, and asking for a variety of *new* skillsets to enter this dynamic and evolving space. Yet conversely, companies do not necessarily know the answers to how they will achieve smarter more sustainable product and business solutions or identify new potential revenue streams beyond the notion that such advancements will involve collaborative working practices. Rather they look to the next generation of upcoming entry-level talent to help transform and future-proof their businesses. Consequently, new challenges are posed to companies and Higher Education Institutions alike. In the case of the former, the question of how to attract and recruit the right Fashion-Tech talent with the necessary skillset and ideology to ensure ongoing innovation in the sector is crucial. While Higher Education must seek to mentor and prepare its graduates as hybrid practitioners for an increasingly digital future where the development of the right mind-set and mix of soft/er skills – being entrepreneurial, open to change, a team player etc., is prioritized alongside that of the necessary hard/er skills. The FT alliance project [2] is a 3-year (2020-2023) Erasmus+ funded academia-industries partnership with 12 consortium partners from European Universities and Fashion Tech industry is focusing the exchange/flow of knowledge and co-creation within the Fashion-Tech sector to boost students' employability and innovation potential. For one of the work packages UAL invited HR representatives from the 12 consortium partners to explore recruitment tools based on the 50 new job roles within 8 job families that were identified in previous research [3]. These job roles were re-assessed using interactive online workshops. This paper shares the findings and recommendations from these workshops and podcast whilst highlighting pedagogical implications for master's level Fashion education.

Keywords: Keywords: Fashion-Tech, Academia-Industries Partnership, Employability, Future Recruitment Strategies, Digitisation, New Job Profiles, Soft/er Skills.

1 INTRODUCTION

Today's Fashion-Tech landscape is in a state of flux – fashion and tech sectors are becoming increasingly more closely aligned and digitization is key. The ongoing digital transformation of the fashion industry poses new opportunities and benefits for companies. For some, it offers a competitive edge as data-driven decision-making impacts everything from marketing to product development [4]. For others it allows for more complex interactions between brands and their consumers, and new beneficial forms of business-to-consumer (B2C) relations to be established. New untapped revenue streams can be captured, for example those connected to virtual fashion and digital assets [5]. Moreover, the complexities and challenges of the (Covid-19 impacted) market environment, where ongoing uncertainty prevails, can be navigated more adeptly through a fashion system that embraces the digital. Significantly, for all companies – large, medium, and small – fashion's digital transformation enables environmental and social priorities to be better addressed. As revealed in the Business of Fashion (BOF) McKinsey State of Fashion 2022 survey, 'digital and sustainability will offer fashion's biggest opportunities for growth' [6]. The 2022 report states that: 'globally, the fashion industry is responsible for around 40 million tonnes of textile waste a year, most of which is either sent to landfill or incinerated' [7]. Digital innovation can assist companies with their sustainability decision-making at design stage, and the critical actions they must take to manage the industry's biodiversity impact and targets for 'closed-loop recycling' at scale [8]. Accordingly, fashion's digital transformation has spawned new job profiles and *interdisciplinary* roles within companies connected to *sustainability*, *design*, *product innovation*, *entrepreneurship*, *manufacturing*, *data analysis*, *management* and *governance*, *policy*

making, *omnichannel* and *e-commerce*. Yet companies realise that in addition to this type of expansion and investment in digital innovation, they need to invest in the right future talent to help provide the necessary fresh ideas and responsive approaches essential for them to survive and thrive in a changing world. However, as outlined in the quote below, reliance to attract and retain talent can no longer be on brand allure alone, rather to remain resilient, company talent agendas must incorporate strategies to attract a diverse and flexible workforce:

> *Companies that rely on brand appeal or the allure of fashion to attract and retain talent will need to raise their game as competition from both within and outside the industry intensifies, leading to more vacancies next year. As employees from upper management to the retail frontline reconsider their priorities, companies must refresh their talent strategies for an increasingly flexible, diverse and digitised workplace* [9]

How the industry tackles the issue of emerging talent recruitment in such a dynamic landscape is the subject of this paper.

The FT alliance project, a 3-year (2020-2023) Erasmus+ funded academia-industries partnership focused on the exchange/flow of knowledge and co-creation within the Fashion-Tech sector to boost students' employability and innovation potential. The consortium consists of 12 partners from European Universities and Fashion-Tech industry [10]. Findings to date have confirmed the Fashion-Tech industry is asking for a variety of new skillsets as revealed in the 50 job profiles/roles identified within 8 job families featured in our report *D1.3 Fashion-Tech Job Profiles Portfolio* [11]. Furthermore, that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) should prepare graduates as hybrid practitioners for an increasingly digital future where the development of the right mind-set and mix of soft/er skills – being entrepreneurial, open to change, a team player etc., is prioritized alongside that of the necessary hard/er skills. For example, in terms of the latter, being trained as a fashion designer or pattern cutter seems no longer to be enough to satisfy industry-specific requirements or to understand the digital product development process, rather specific digital skills and knowledge are also required. The pace of change is fast moving, and accordingly, as outlined by Marc Bain [12], the educational institutions training the next generation of fashion industry creatives must work hard to keep up. Bains notes the inclusion of emerging technologies in fashion curricula to be irregular and that even in terms of 3D design, one of the most prevalent new skills students are learning, not all top fashion schools include this in their curriculum offer. Yet, as Bains highlights, and our ongoing FT alliance academia-industry exchanges reveal, fashion's digital turn and its transformational impacts, require a corresponding shift within fashion's education system to equip graduates with the necessary digital capabilities. This research recognises however that the furnishing of young creatives with the right skills mix is only part of education's shifting role when it comes to fashion's digital ecosystem. For our graduates to fully make an impact, we must also better understand how companies are recruiting future talent, and the tools and techniques they are utilising to assess candidates.

2 METHODOLOGY

In May 2021, online 'Future Recruitment Workshops' were held with Human Resource (HR) representatives from the 12 consortium members from the European universities and Fashion-Tech industry to scope out new job roles, skills, recruitment strategies and tools for the assessment of emerging talent (see figure 1). The workshops held on Teams also provided a space to re-evaluate job descriptions to better attract future talent and a more diverse workforce. Initial steps involved London College of Fashion's (LCF) Graduate Futures team, who provide careers support to current students and alumni, holding a first workshop to identify the most promising jobs in each of the previously identified 8 job families (featuring 50 job profiles/roles). For the second workshop, held 25 May 2021, HR representatives from across the consortium were invited to explore recruitment tools and techniques related to the most promising future job roles and associated roles defined in the first workshop.

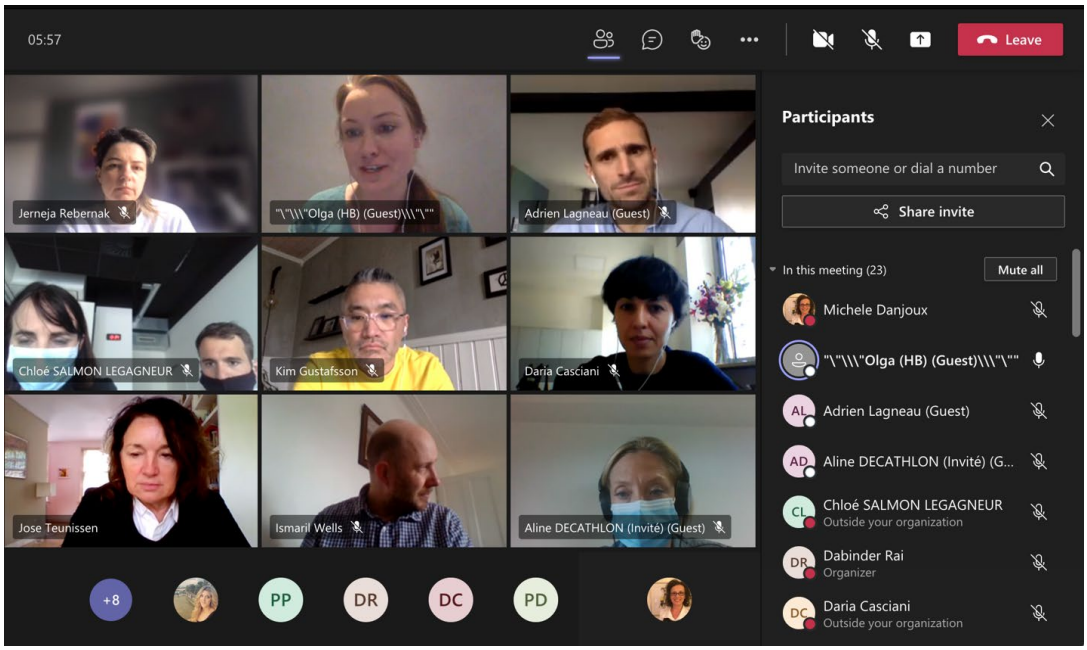

Figure 1. Online Future Recruitment Workshop, 25 May 2021

The aim of the second workshop was to seek the HR participants' specific insights and intelligence on methods of attracting, assessing, and recruiting future Fashion-Tech talent. This was a brainstorming, provocation-driven workshop intended to initiate and capture dialogue that can inform various stakeholders – students, tutors, careers, and industry [13]. The project report Insights, including how students can better pitch their work, were captured on Miro boards (figure 2).

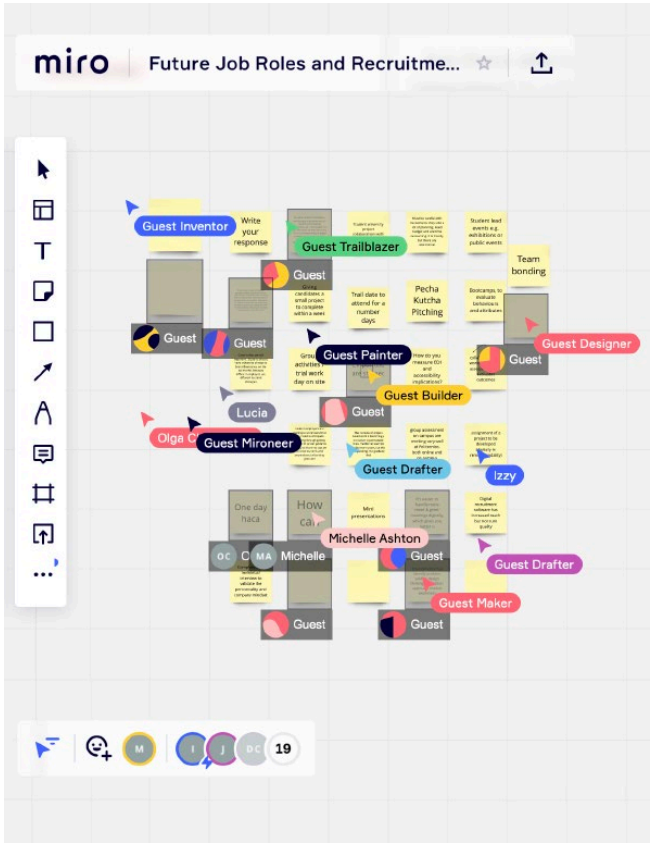

Figure 2. Miro Board content, responses to provocation questions, Future Recruitment Workshop, 25 May 2021

As a further step in our investigations of recruitment strategies, the insights captured during the workshops were used to design the format for a series of podcast interviews with the project's industry partners. These were held between June and July 2021. Conducted with 4 of the companies – micro/small, medium, and large, the podcasts sought to secure a cross section of more in-depth findings on specific tools and techniques utilized by different companies – hackathons, internships, technical tasks, group/individual interviews etc., for assessing and recruiting the right multidisciplinary future fashion-tech talent. The series also yielded valuable insights on how companies have adjusted to the Covid-19 pandemic and are responding to the important issues relating to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in their recruitment processes.

3 RESULTS

3.1 HR Challenges and Fashion-Tech talent recruitment

3.1.1 Introduction

During the provocation-driven workshops issues were discussed related to traditional modes of assessment such as the CV and portfolio, and how these might be transformed, versus newer ways of selecting the right candidate such as hackathons, bootcamps and project-based internships. Ideas and current company practices were inputted to MIRO boards in real-time.

3.1.2 Skill sets assessment and screening candidates

The interview (in person or virtual) is still seen to be the best way to assess a candidate, however a variety of additional practices were promoted to ensure the right person is hired. These included several group-based assessment opportunities for the evaluation of candidates such as the completion of a problem-solving brief; presenting to a group; a group interview and sometimes an additional small one-day assignment to help assess a candidate's soft skills in relation to others more deeply. In some instances (Grado Zero Innovation), built-in project-based traineeships within interdisciplinary teams afforded a longer-term assessment of an individual's suitability for the company.

Our discussions also revealed the importance of being very clear on how the company works to recruit well. Are there for example multiple projects underway at the same time involving a diverse range of tasks, and what types of working methods can be expected. The workshop participants noted that usually, the reaction of the candidate will reveal if they are comfortable with this.
The use of the 'why?' question to further interrogate a candidate at interview was also promoted. 'Stay near to the talent pool' was the clear resounding message from Fashion-Tech employers who understand that their collaborations with HEIs via *industry projects* allow them to assess students before they graduate. *Networking events* and *open days* with Higher Education Institutions represent another way for early exploration of talent. Vice versa, *trial group assessment* led by real company Human Resources helps students to self-assess on a set of skills and this represents a fundamental tool in the process of future recruitment. Feedback also highlighted that the pandemic/Covid-19 has ushered in new recruitment processes such as the *digital interview*, which has allowed for a more global approach to recruitment – alumni working anywhere can very easily be assessed. It has made panels confident with a digital interview using *online assessment tasks* as a tool.

3.1.3 Future skills and how to evaluate them

As outlined in the introduction it is important to note that future young professionals will need to have more knowledge in *innovative techniques* but will need upskilling with traditional technical processing techniques. In the near future the acquisition of innovative technical skills such as those connected to 3D designing and pattern making, new wearable technologies, robotics and automatization, AI (artificial intelligence) etc., will become essential. However, having the right digital skills is not always critical at the point of recruitment. What is more important is that candidates have a 3D mind-set and are open to learn new and different software. Moreover, having an entrepreneurial mind-set, being flexible, adaptable, and open to change is essential.

Furthermore, recruitment focus is changing from *being experienced* to h*aving potential a*nd the interest is centred on recruiting those who can grow the company. Organizational and soft skills related to both

traditional and new technologies such as 3D design process are essential to enable cross-fertilizations to drive Fashion-Tech innovation along with sustainability and circularity improvements. Soft skills associated with team working and facilitation of interdisciplinary international collaborations are important as well as soft skills such as empathy; flexibility; being constructive in negotiations trying to understand and weigh up different perspectives and problems.

During the workshop following recommendations have been made to measure these new skills:

- ask candidates at the interview to give concrete examples or situations, problems they have run in to find out how they approach things
- ask for examples where they have been able to demonstrate the skills
- ask the applicant the most unpleasant situation in his previous job and how he/she handled the issue
- look at professional networks such as LinkedIn to see CV, portfolio, and 'candidate' links
- use talent tests like Gallup (https://www.gallup.com/home..aspx) to unlock the true potential of your people to create a complementary team.
- monitor and coach newly appointed candidates settling in and evaluate which areas they perform well in and where is their performances is weak/er
- during the interview explicitly ask candidates to share their soft skills and to what extend they have experience working in a team. Also ask what role/s in a team they have fulfilled and what soft skills they would like to develop further. This normally reveals whether they are self-reflective or not enough
- ask the candidate where they see themselves in 5 to 10 years. This shows what kind of positions they aspire to having in the future
- check references from previous employers / group activities to see interactions and roles taken up within a group

3.1.4 A different kind of Portfolio

Portfolios should no longer only highlight collections or other final products but emphasize more the process and the conceptual thinking. Students need to consider in what way they can better pitch their ideas, demonstrate skills, and present their work to highlight their entrepreneurial mind-set and fresh innovative ideas. Moreover, the design process and approach (both visually and descriptively in writing/ annotations) should be included in the portfolio, visuals (photo/videos) of the final work are not enough. A digital video explaining the candidate's background as well as how they can create innovations is an asset. Since attitude and mentality are key skills - student must find out more about values, cultures and ambitions of the brand and compare their own background, skillsets and ambitions with the brand values and the job (assess what is the common ground, what are the goals of the company etc). Candidates need to demonstrate as well an ability to actively listen; show curiosity; be authentic and have a good level of citizenship; cultural engagement and critical awareness and be able to evidence this.

3.1.5 Guidelines for (inclusive) job descriptions

The digitalisation of the fashion industry across online sales, digital product development and business models is a very complicated and disruptive process. Companies are making progress, but do not always know where the digital pilots and experiments will land and what kind of jobs and structures they will need in the future. For the recruitment process it is therefore important to try to be as clear as possible in the job description of the role and responsibilities. Describe the purpose of the role, duties, working relationships, work environment, person specification, what kind of person the company wants to attract (skills and soft skills), what kind of values they are looking to promote e.g., Equity Diversity and Inclusion (EDI [see further below]). In addition, the context of the role within the organisation and its strategic setting is essential – what sits alongside the role; what are the core company values etc.

3.1.6 Equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI)

On the critical subject of Equity Diversity and Inclusion, companies are recognising the importance to future success of a diverse workforce. Furthermore, that there is no one-size-fits all solution to attracting and recruiting future talent but that it is important to actively welcome applicants with a diverse background, demonstrating the organisation's value, to establish a more varied workforce. Companies do need to make sure the description is written in an inclusive language and should ask diverse employees within the organisation to read the job description to check for unconscious bias. The wording

of the Job Description can influence the type of candidates you attract for example, using gendered language – feminine or masculine or gender-neutral language will alter who a company attracts.

3.2 Podcast interviews

3.2.1 Introduction

As a final iteration to our investigations into Fashion-Tech recruitment processes, a series of podcast interviews with hiring specialists from 4 companies across the consortium were conducted to enable a deeper and richer understanding of the subject to be gained. These took place June-July 2021 and involved representation from a mix of SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises), big brands and business-to-business (B2B). The participating companies were Decathlon, Pauline van Dongen, Centexbel and Grado Zero Innovation. The emphasis for all 4 podcasts was placed on both the current Fashion-Tech landscape and potential future job roles in Fashion-Tech. The previously conducted provocation-driven workshops with HR (discussed above) had highlighted the following issues as requiring further interrogation: 1) the new challenges posed to companies to attract future Fashion-Tech talent with the right skillsets; 2) the required balance of traditional craft skills and digital skills; 3) the importance of soft/er skills, team players, entrepreneurial skills, and the question of how to assess these skills. These areas were addressed during the podcasts via 10 lead questions [14]. All 4 podcasts and are available on the FT alliance website [15] together with company digital portfolios [16]. A summary of some of the most important insights offered from 2 of the participating companies – Decathlon, a large company specialising in sporting goods design and distribution, and Pauline van Dongen, a Dutch fashion designer and researcher whose micro/small enterprises specializes in smart textiles and wearable technologies, are highlighted below.

3.2.2 Case Study: Decathlon

Decathlon is in 43 countries, and has more than 90 000 employees in retail, design, and production. Their focus is on sport and their purpose ‘to sustainably make the pleasures and benefits of sport accessible to the many’ [17]. At Decathlon, they deal with 60 different sports across different interdisciplinary teams where the team themselves in consultation with HR is responsible for their recruitment. Our podcast interview was conducted with Audric Thomas, Technical Director for the swimming brand, Nabaiji at Decathlon. With approximately 60 employees the Nabaiji brand generates 5% of Decathlon’s total output – product ranges include swimsuits, swimming goggles, swimming accessories, towels, sandals etc. Their jobs encompass fashion designer, textile engineer, pattern maker, component engineer and methods engineer. Thomas has a degree in Technical Textiles and Advanced Materials and a Masters in Biomechanics, important to him, is to link the human and the environment with the product. He joined Decathlon 6 years ago but talks about the fact that with Decathlon you might regularly change jobs and have the opportunity to work with different brands. In his current role, he leads on the design strategy for the Nabaiji brand. In his team there are 13 product engineers involved in the development of the swimsuit. Here the focus is on the ‘users’ and to be more precise with ensuring product advantage – research and development are crucial to address the needs of their consumers. With regards to recruitment, Thomas explains here are 4 main points they search for at Decathlon in their applicants: 1) ‘Vitality’, to be dynamic is very important for the company, ‘to dare, to take opportunity and to propose something out of the box’; 2) a shared love of ‘sport’, all team mates practice sport at different levels, beginner to expert. Thomas notes the level is not important, but the shared experience helps build community; 3) ‘team spirit’, since teams spend a lot time together, prospective employees will need to get along and communicate easily with their co-workers and production and process teams; 4) to be ‘concrete’ on a shared value to win. At Decathlon they use a variety of techniques to assess the Fashion-Tech talent related to the different kinds of jobs on offer. For *product engineers*, they need applicants who know textile construction (knit and weave), sublimation, printing and finishing processes. Project management capabilities are also required here, so whilst this is a technical job, Thomas also prioritises the need for soft/er skills such as good verbal and written communication effective in a global context. In terms of other technical jobs such as *pattern makers*, the technical skills relating to garment fitting are positioned by Decathlon as essential. Moreover, since fit is highlighted as key to user-experience and customer satisfaction. Moreover, since 90% of the work is still currently done utilising traditional 2D to 3D methods, with 3D design gradually growing, traditional skills in this area remain of paramount importance. With regards to the assessment of these hard/er skills and technical capabilities, the ‘experts’ within the team such as pattern makers

take on this responsibility. Thomas will assess the human part and softer skills of the applicant. The recruitment process/experience takes place over a full day. 'The morning is about soft/er skills and if possible, we practice sport with the team' notes Thomas, 'and in the second part of the day we have some technical tests for the applicant… The applicant is not alone during the tests but with the expert to understand the technical skills of the applicant'.

With regards to the pandemic, recruitment during this period has been totally different says Thomas. He explains that the digital part is not a problem to understand the capabilities of the applicant. He notes however the importance of a physical interview and opportunity to meet the applicant in person to assess them fully.

On the further interrogation of skills – traditional vs digital, and 3D capabilities specifically, Thomas acknowledges the shift towards 3D design and processes. He notes the pattern maker for example will need to improve their 3D capabilities or rather product engineers will need to use new tools. In terms of textile applicants, Thomas says it's impossible or very rare to find the person with these new skills. Decathlon therefore offer 3D training for pattern makers and stylists to enable them to achieve the garment design using digital processes and learn how to communicate and work together effectively in digital space. He adds here the importance still to them however of the 2D development space and associated more traditional pattern making skills and software knowledge such as Lectra.

In terms of recommendation to applicants to better pitch their ideas and present their work, Thomas says values are important to communicate and to keep things simple and authentic to one's own beliefs. Eco design is also important and to show concrete actions in design thinking and outcomes or strategies that address this critical area. With skills, an applicant should find ways to show their ability to switch between local concrete operational actions and larger more global strategic thinking. At interview Thomas particularly enjoys the applicant spending time introducing themselves to find out about them, their hobbies, sports and what they do outside the professional part of their lives. During the interview they obviously think about study and motivation, but hobbies can impart 'vitality' explains Thomas –they are indicators of personality. At Decathlon, they look to the whole person.

Finally, regarding issues of Equity Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), and securing a diverse workforce to better meet their talent goals and address social and sustainability agendas, Thomas explains Decathlon is an international brand. As such he says, they look to recruit globally to create a multicultural personality for the company. One that can better address the global problematic and embody the international and human values at Decathlon.

3.2.3 Case Study: Pauline van Dongen

Pauline van Dongen's design studio was founded in 2010 and has 4-5 employees. Her company develops alternatives for current fashion practices by exploring the role of technology in textiles and clothing with regards to our body-garment relations. Following Pauline's commitment to creating a more open and collaborative fashion system, the studio is dedicated to collaborative, interdisciplinary working practices that bring academia, industry, research centres, manufacturing companies etc., together as part of an ecosystem. The studio's vision is based on the belief that technology can add new value and meaning to fashion and can enhance our ways of being in the world. With small studios such as hers, Van Dongen notes the importance of combining different roles into one, and of having close personal contact with everyone involved in the team whether internal or external collaborators. She stresses that for her, teams are built across organisations, and thus, in terms of recruitment/hiring to her company, it is important to ensure a person can fit with these types of dynamic team structures. Furthermore, Van Dongen underlines the need for companies to be very specific on the role and type of person they seek to recruit and to include the required soft skills which she refers to as 'attitude'. She notes that being too general in a job description is not helpful to recruitment, rather to be able to attract the right candidate you need to start with a very clear description of the job, company and company culture. The educational background she would look for is quite broad for the formation of her interdisciplinary teams – the fashion-tech spectrum is too extensive for one person to cover all aspects she notes. Rather Van Dongen looks to build her team/s with people with a combination of different skillsets in an environment where people can learn from one another. For Van Dongen, the collaborative mindset is thus her number one priority, followed by one of curiosity. A person's *attitude* is a key indicator of whether they will fit into a team. Do they for example possess an inquisitive nature, are they eager to explore the boundaries, a process thinker, are they keen to acquire new skills and knowledge and so on are the things Van Dongen seeks to understand. She acknowledges, it can be hard to gauge these qualities in an applicant. In her

recruitment processes, she uses online interviews where she can interrogate the applicant on their working preferences but can also check an applicant's portfolio for evidence of collaborative working – the portfolio is a good vehicle to assess an applicant for a collaborative mindset. If process is communicated in the portfolio this also provides a way for Van Dongen to see whether an applicant is a good match for the company.

In terms of the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, Van Dongen feels that even though she already utilised digital interviews as a recruitment tool, the need for more online approaches to accompany this method has generated a more 'equal process for all applicants' regardless of their location in the world. Previoulsy, local applicants may have come into the studio but now, the greater use of online tools has facilitated more inclusive hiring methods. With regards to skills and the balance of traditional versus digital skills, Van Dongen acknowledges there are still quite diverse skillsets to be found within applicants to her company and it depends for her what she is specifically looking for in a project. She notes that the digital may not be the most valuable skill if creativity, craft skills and research capabilities exist within an applicant. What matters to her most here when it comes to the digital is the awareness demonstrated by the applicant of how technology relates to design and can impact the fashion system. She stresses again, the most important thing is to find the 'right fit with the right company', and for Van Dongen an applicant ticking all the boxes is not necessarily essential when it comes to their experience of technology. They do not need to be self-sufficient or able to resolve everything alone but rather work with others collaboratively regarding technology and experimentation on different levels. Another thing is she likes to get a sense of 'how people are wired. She appreciates the 'personal touches', being shown something unusual, inventive, creative when it comes to concepts and ideas, since a small company needs to work from a shared vision and inspire each other.

Finally, another aspect that Van Dongen highlights in the podcast is the fact that companies must create an inclusive culture without unconscious bias. Now, in the context of some of the challenges outlined in the introduction to this paper, engineers/technologists and fashion designers must work on challenges together. This also means they must also learn to understand and appreciates the differences within those disciplines: a functional/calculated/rigid approach versus a more feminine and ephemeral fashion approach.

3.2.4 results/findings from podcast interviews

The most import findings from the in-depth interviews with the brands are that all companies, regardless of their size or activities, are looking for: 1) adventurous candidates, who think 'out of the box' – have a thinker's approach, want to explore the boundaries, and welcome the challenges of an increasingly digitised industry without being afraid to fail; 2) Team players but more specifically someone who fits within the culture of the existing team within the company. This also then underlines the importance of a clear job description with detailed information about the company, its culture and specific requirements and skills the company is looking for; 3) In terms of graduates possessing the necessary skills mix – digital and analog; soft/er and hard/er, we discovered that requirements can vary and that what is most important beyond creativity and innovative, entrepreneurial thinking and team working capabilities, is an awareness of the transformational potentials of the digital to fashion's processes and landscape. All companies underlined the importance of applicants having the right mind-set and mix of soft/er skills as means to reflect their own potential – stressing, it is the digital mindset that is important here. Furthermore, our findings revealed that many companies offer internal digital training to their employees – Fashion-Tech skills are seen as constantly emerging and growing, therefore upskilling and training employees with new skills is recognised as part of an ongoing digital transformation; 4) A responsiveness and adaptability are also key in an applicant since companies do not know where the digitalisation of processes is heading and thus what competences they will need for the future. This reinforces earlier project findings from our 'Staff Learning Mobilities' [18], that candidates should demonstrate 'a digital approach' and 'the skillset to implement change whilst being agile and open to new ways of thinking' [19]; 5) In certain companies, particularly larger ones such as Decathlon, Fashion-Tech incubators and start-ups are leading digital processes and upskilling, infiltrating the business, and influencing the future with regards to sustainability and innovation. As a result, companies have prioritised the need for an interdisciplinary approach to open up the siloed departments for enhanced knowledge sharing and collaboration from a multiplicity of perspectives.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The findings described above delve beneath the surface of the practices and processes companies are using to recruit future talent to a Fashion-Tech industry undergoing ongoing digital transformation. They also reveal pedagogical implications and the shifting role education can play in connection to employability. The need for new approaches to be adopted that prepare graduates for a multi-layered recruitment process are clearly communicated in this research. As is the development of a portfolio that highlights process (in addition to final outcomes) and communicates a collaboration dimension together with examples of critical and strategic thinking. Team working capabilities that involve shared responsibility and priorities; cultural alignment and communication of values that connect to social and environmental agendas also need to be highlighted.

Based on these findings, in September 2021, the FT alliance partners developed two units/courses for MA students across the 5 participating HEIs: 1) 'The Secret Life of Clothes: exploring garment interactions' developed by University of the Arts London –London College of Fashion (UAL-LCF [UK]) partnered with Pauline Van Dongen. This course focused on the field of interaction and experience design for Fashion-Tech, exploring how we interact with worn objects on a daily basis and how these interactions can be leveraged to create digitally enhanced experiences; 2) 'The Scalability of Multidisciplinary Fashion-Tech Solutions: addressing future scalability challenges' developed by the University of Borås (HB [Sweden]) partnered with Centexbel (CTX) and We Love You (WLY) from the consortium. This course focuses on the field of Fashion-Tech and their value chains, aiming to advance students' knowledge on identifying future sustainable development challenges and how these can be solved by developing inter-disciplinary and scalable fashion-tech solutions (covering design, technology, management aspects).

The design of these two learning experiences built on a first unit titled 'Fashion-Tech Interline' developed by academic partner, Politecnico di Milano –School of Design (Italy) and held early in 2021. This involved a 'discover'; 'define'; 'challenge based' and 'delivery' part [19]. They also looked to outcomes of the E4FT European project [20], where a MA framework and units for Fashion-Tech course were established. Both courses placed emphasis on research and communication of process (not purely final outcome/artefacts), modes of presentation for enhanced pitching skills to be developed. They also focused on soft/er skills and team work that involved shared responsibility and priorities. The aim, to foster in students an adventurous approach to innovation and the development of entrepreneurial skills within the field of Fashion-Tech whilst being empathetic to others.

The outcomes of these courses will be available later in 2022 and will form the next part of our dissemination process connected to our academia-industries knowledge exchange activities and findings on the future of Fashion-Tech for education and industry.

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[9] McKinsey/BoF, The State of Fashion 2022, p.11, 2022. Retrieved from URL: https://www.mckinsey.com/~/media/mckinsey/industries/retail/our%20insights/state%20of%20fashion/2022/the-state-of-fashion-2022.pdf

[10] For the 12 partners see: https://fashiontechalliance.eu/en/about-us/patners-description

[11] D1.3 Fashion-Tech Job Profiles Portfolio: Future Job Roles in Fashion-Tech + Human Resource Guidelines + Future Recruitment Tools available at: https://fashiontechalliance.eu/images/reports-and-publications/D13_FASHION-TECH_JOB_PROFILES_PORTFOLIO.pdf

[12] Bain, Marc (2022) 'The New Technologies Fashion Schools are Teaching Students' *The Business of Fashion (BOF)*: https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/technology/the-new-technologies-fashion-schools-are-teaching-students/

[13] *D1.3 Fashion-Tech Job Profiles Portfolio* features findings from these workshops, available at: https://fashiontechalliance.eu/images/reports-and-publications/D13_FASHION-TECH_JOB_PROFILES_PORTFOLIO.pdf, pp. 51-60.

[14] J.Teunissen, M Danjoux (ed), *Fashion-Tech Job Profiles, pp 38,39, 2021 Retrieved from URL:* https://fashiontechalliance.eu/images/reports-and-publications/D13_FASHION-TECH_JOB_PROFILES_PORTFOLIO.pdf

[15] All 4 podcasts on 'Fashion-Tech and Recruitment Processes' available at: https://fashiontechalliance.eu/en/open-resources/podcasts

[16] The partner portfolios are available at: https://fashiontechalliance.eu/en/open-resources/partner-portfolios

[17] Decathlon's purpose is stated in their introductory film available at: https://fashiontechalliance.eu/en/decathlon-digital-portfolio

[18] See: D1.2 Report on Staff Learning Mobilities available at: https://fashiontechalliance.eu/images/reports-and-publications/D12_Report_on_staff_learning_mobilities.pdf, p. 25.

[19] For further insights see: https://fashiontechalliance.eu/images/reports-and-publications/D2_1_Project_based_Learning_Modules.pdf

[20] For more information on this earlier ERASMUS+ Funded project visit: www.E4FT.eu