Industry insight – Fashion and design

In a nutshell

The fashion and design industry covers everything from the supply of raw materials through to the finished end product and includes designing, trading and wholesaling. Opportunities at management level are growing while many manufacturing roles are moving overseas.

The fashion and design industry is made up of well-established companies and high-levels of self-employment (Creative Skillset, 2011).

Graduates need to be skilled, self-motivated, hard-working, resilient and flexible to succeed in the industry. The sector is very competitive with a rise in the importance and speed of design, marketing and distribution.

What kind of work can I do?

The fashion and textile industry has always recruited graduates for designer and production manager roles, but now recruitment is broadening. Business and technical skills and experience in international business are increasingly important. The types of careers graduates are recruited into can be divided into the following categories:

- Design and product development: using creative and technical skills to initiate new products and ranges and update existing ones, e.g. Fashion designer, Textile designer.
- Business and management: managing the processes between the starting point (product initiation) and the end result (supply of goods to the customer), e.g. Production manager, Retail buyer, Retail merchandiser.
- Technology: using specialist technical knowledge to support the design and production process, e.g. Clothing/textile technologist.
- Associated careers: there are many associated fashion and textile careers - their focus is on fashion and textiles but they originate from other industries such as journalism, media, conservation, archiving, teaching and lecturing.

What’s it like working in this industry?

All companies have unique expectations and working cultures. However, you are expected to have a strong interest in fashion, read relevant industry press and be up to date with future trends.

Working conditions vary depending on the nature of work. For example, working as a designer differs significantly from working as a production manager or as a fashion journalist. Salaries may be low within the first stages of your career. You may have to work long hours, especially if you are freelance. If you have an office role, working hours are generally 9am to 5pm. Some roles, e.g. buyer, involve time away from home on business trips. Part-time work in the industry is slightly below the UK average, although certain parts of the industry, such as manufacturing, lends itself better to part-time work.
As awareness about environmental conservation, cruelty to animals and ethical issues in business is rising, fashion brands are increasingly adopting ethical and sustainable production values. Customers are also becoming more aware of ethical fashion, with demand on the rise.

According to Creative Skillset: The Sector Skills Council for the Creative Industries there is a fairly even balance of men and women in the apparel, footwear and textiles sector (48% and 52% respectively). Those from an ethnic minority background are quite well represented with 38,000 black, Asian and minority ethnic employees being present in the servicing and manufacturing sections of the industry.

Creative Skillset also reports that the sector is aging with around 73% of the workforce being aged 35 or over. This will create a need for young talent to be recruited into the industry as skilled employees retire.

There are approximately 79,000 firms in the fashion and textiles industry in the UK, with over 340,000 employees. London, the South East, North West and East Midlands have the greatest proportion of fashion and textile businesses.

London is the centre for the media and the music businesses, both of which are important in influencing and communicating trends within the fashion industry.

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**Entry and progression**

**How do I find a job?**

University careers services can be a good starting point for researching the market and refining your job search.

The British Library Industry Guides are useful at providing contacts and there is a specific one on fashion which lists fashion directories, trade magazines, newsletters, internet sources and market research.

Jobs are advertised on a variety of websites including:

- Drapers Jobs - specialist site;
- Fashion United - specialist site;
- Fashion Therapy - fashion and design recruitment agency;
- Freedom Recruitment - fashion and design recruitment agency.

Useful sites covering fashion in the broader sense of media are:

- PR Week
- The Business of Fashion (BOF)
- Diary Directory
- Fashion Monitor

Jobs tend to be advertised all year round and speculative applications are accepted, particularly in smaller companies which may not have large recruitment budgets. Attending trade fairs and exhibitions can provide a good opportunity for gathering employer information. Pure and Moda are the UK’s leading fashion trade exhibitions in the
sector. Career fairs are also a good way of networking and distributing your CV for future employment.

Websites such as FashionCapital are useful for researching fashion shows, exhibitions and jobs, while designer forums such as East Midlands Textiles Association (EMTEX) and Creative Fashion Forum can offer up-to-date industry advice and information on trends, training and business support. Blogs have also become a useful networking tool for sharing good practice and generating business and freelance opportunities.

Creative Skillset: The Sector Skills Council for the Creative Industries reports that employers in fashion and textiles have a slightly lower proportion of vacancies compared to those in England as a whole. However, Northern Ireland and Wales have a much higher proportion compared to the UK average. Vacancies tend to be prevalent in sales and customer service and associate professional roles.

**What skills do I need?**

Employers within the fashion and design industry seek an array of skills and qualities including communication, time management, organisational and entrepreneurial skills, flexibility and commercial awareness, as well as a genuine interest and commitment in the sector. They may also require technical knowledge of garment technology, information technology, production and supply chain management, textile technology, and good business acumen.

Foreign languages are very useful, particularly when liaising with manufacturers and designers in Asia, Africa and Europe.

Your studies develop skills needed to enter the sector. However, relevant experience, even working on the shop floor, can boost your CV. Attending specific events such as the Graduate Fashion Week and London Fashion Week can help you develop your networking skills and knowledge of the sector.

Professional membership of bodies such as the Chartered Society of Designers (CSD), Textile Institute and British Fashion Council can help you to develop and update your industrial awareness and networking skills.

**Where can I find work experience?**

The competitive world of fashion and design has made work experience a vital aspect of career building. Many degrees require you to undertake several work placements or an internship for the summer months.

Creative Skillset reports that employers in the sector find they have a low proportion of applicants with the required skills. 59% of businesses perceive they would face skills shortages when recruiting and that candidates would have a lack of experience. To give yourself a competitive edge therefore, you should consider gaining as much relevant work experience as possible.

Work experience is also an essential means of developing your business and commercial awareness and knowledge of the sector. It can be a useful way of developing your technical, organisational and networking skills as well as refining your future career focus.

The type of work experience you undertake depends on the sector within fashion and design that you want to enter. Sales experience in fashion retail can be useful, as can any
work that provides an insight into the fashion industry. Your academic department or careers service may be able to help you source a relevant placement. If you wish to get into fashion design you should consider putting together a portfolio which contains technical drawings, patterns and actual garments you have made.

The Graduate Fashion Week Protégé Project is designed to place graduates into temporary, paid employment to provide them with valuable industry experience.

Is postgraduate study useful?

Postgraduate study is not necessary to get into the sector; however in a competitive market it can help you develop a more extensive portfolio and specialist knowledge. Additionally, if your first degree is not directly fashion-related, postgraduate study can help you acquire more specific technical knowledge and demonstrate your commitment to the industry.

Professional affiliation is vital for professional networking and keeping up to date with trends, brands and the industry as a whole. The following professional bodies offer courses, training, business advice and support within the sector:

- British Fashion Council
- Chartered Society of Designers (CSD)
- Textile Institute
- UK Fashion & Textile Association (UKFT)

How can my career develop?

Careers may be structured within certain areas and graduates may start on the shop floor, as assistant or retail manager or in a clerical position in the merchandising/buying department and work their way up to more senior positions.

The fashion and design industry relies heavily on networking. Knowing and getting known by the right people is essential for your career development, especially for jobs such as designer, photographer or journalist, for example.

Alternatively, you may go freelance or even start your own business.

Typical employers

Big players

Design or fashion-related roles may be available at some of the large fashion retailers in the UK including:

- The Arcadia group;
- Debenhams;
- F&F at Tesco;
- George at ASDA;
- House of Fraser;
- Karen Millen;
- Marks and Spencer;
Monsoon; New Look; Next plc; Primark; River Island; Stuart Peters.

These offer a wide variety of industrial placements and schemes for graduates and trainees within the fashion and design sector. Careers and roles can vary considerably from retail management and buying to merchandising, design and garment technology.

Early applications are always preferred; therefore it is essential to check their websites regularly for vacancies and recruitment information. Always check the application and assessment process as well as degree requirements.

Other employers of fashion and textile designers include:

- in-house design studios in large manufacturing or retail organisations;
- specialist design studios serving couture and designer ready-to-wear markets;
- manufacturing and processing companies that produce clothing, soft-furnishings and other textile-based products;
- interior design and decoration companies.

The Textile Institute has a list of corporate members with links to websites and contact details and the UK Fashion and Textile Association (UKFT) has a search function for major companies.

**Small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)**

There are many opportunities to work in SMEs in fashion and design as the sector is dominated by them, with around 80% of establishments employing 10 people or fewer.

SMEs can be found across the sector in areas including:

- dressmaking;
- fashion design;
- specialist footwear;
- specialist design techniques, e.g. embroidery or hand-weaving;
- clothing alterations;
- wholesale operations;
- niche manufacturing.

Working in an SME can be rewarding as it is likely that you will take on greater responsibility from an early stage and may be able to progress quicker. Opportunities for formal training may not be as readily available as in the larger companies and the work is likely to involve a lot of on-the-job learning.

SMEs typically advertise their vacancies through the local press, university careers service bulletins, local graduate vacancy listings and by word of mouth.

**Self-employment**
The fashion and design industry lends itself well to self-employment opportunities. Just over a fifth of the workforce is self-employed compared to 13% of the workforce across the UK as a whole.

Fashion or textiles designers may begin by working on a freelance basis through an agent and with experience and established contacts could then go on to open their own business. Work can be marketed through trade fairs or directly to buyers from large businesses or niche outlets.

For those who wish to start their own business, support and advice is available from:

- British Fashion Council
- Business Link
- Crafts Council
- The Design Trust
- UK Fashion and Textile Association (UKFT)

**Opportunities abroad**

The UK fashion design industry is recognised and respected across the world allowing British designers to take their work overseas. London holds a position as a major contributor to the international fashion arena and [London Fashion Week](#) is one of the ‘big four’ along with New York, Milan and Paris.

If you wish to work abroad in fashion and design it is useful if you can speak a foreign language. While a lot of the business will possibly be carried out in English it is helpful if you are able to speak with suppliers, traders and other colleagues in the country’s official language. Having additional skills in areas such as photography, graphics, writing, or delivering presentations can also help to set you apart from the strong competition.

Given the increasingly international nature of the industry, it is not unusual for new designers to sell their work abroad or to overseas companies. This may create opportunities to travel to other countries to make deals, etc. and there are many examples of graduates working overseas, at least for some of their careers. The countries of particular interest to graduates wishing to work abroad are those with the biggest international reputations - Italy, France and Spain.

It can be difficult to work in countries outside of the EU due to work permit restrictions but it does depend on the nature of your work and level of expertise. If your aim is to work in New York for example, you need to make sure you research the requirements for entering and working in the country fully. It may be easier to find employment in a UK-based company which has connections with companies overseas along with the possibility of sending its employees on assignments there.

The [UK Fashion and Textile Association (UKFT)](#) has an exports division which aims to help British-based fashion and clothing companies to sell worldwide and contains valuable information on the key export markets overseas for British businesses. The UKFT can also help international buyers or agents to get in touch with British companies and it supports companies and members with overseas export shows and exhibitions.

**Will my qualifications be recognised?**
Not all countries accept the same qualifications and some impose different rules and regulations. However, the Bologna Process has introduced a standardised degree system across most of the EU, and many countries now adopt the familiar Bachelors, Masters and Doctorate classifications. These are also typically comparable to the degree systems in places like the US, Canada and Australia.

Specific fashion or design qualifications that are offered by major professional bodies and organisations are more likely to be internationally recognised than qualifications from small courses or on-the-job training. Industrial experience and affiliation to relevant trade associations and professional bodies will always strengthen a candidate’s prospects, enhancing expertise and commercial awareness.

There are a number of organisations that help with the transfer of your qualifications. ENIC-NARIC is a good place to start, as it gives information on the policies and procedures for the recognition of qualifications in 55 counties. Europass is another UK-based organisation that helps with documentation to work, study or train in Europe.

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**Future trends**

Information on future trends and skills implications can be found at [Creative Skillset: The Sector Skills Council for the Creative Industries](#), which covers some of the following topics:

**Alternative sources**

There has been a steady decline in manufacturing processes in the last ten years in the UK. Retailers and wholesalers are now sourcing products from competitive emerging markets as costs are generally lower. UK manufactures now find that profits are falling particularly if dealing in low value manufacturing. The result of this is that some manufacturers are moving into higher value goods, exclusive niche markets and specialised production to give them an edge over their cheaper competitors. This means that higher value-added and knowledge-based skills are required in manufacturing in the UK, whilst other lower-value elements have been moved overseas.

**Technical textiles**

The demand for textiles that are created for their performance qualities rather than how they look is growing. These technical textiles are used in a range of areas including protective clothing for the emergency services, products and garments for medical services and carbon fibre for aircraft frames. Growth in this part of the sector calls for more individuals who have technical and scientific skills as well as the ability to develop and sell innovative products and processes. Higher education institutions and industry will also need to work in closer partnership.

**Fast fashion**

Changing consumer tastes and demand for the latest trends have resulted in increasing pressures on companies to provide fast fashion. Short production and distribution lead times (sometimes as short as 15 days from concept to stock in stores) are required in haute couture ranges, designer ready-to-wear collections and copycat or modified designs by large retailers. For fast fashion to be successful, designers and manufacturers need to have a good understanding of their consumers and excellent commercial awareness.
Production practices also need to be flexible, logistics operations need to be efficient and the use of well developed IT systems is important.

**Legislation and sustainability**

Environmental concerns are something that all sectors are having to consider and the fashion and textile industry is no exception. The impact of considering environmental factors will hit firms in a variety of ways including availability of raw materials, transport costs, energy and water use, and the effective disposal of waste. All of these factors can cause an increase in processing costs and in order to meet sustainability demands companies will require employees who understand the legislation linked to sustainability and how it impacts on the business. There are established networks and initiatives such as Ethical Fashion Forum, Better Cotton Initiative and Labour Behind The Label which focus upon improving social, environmental and economic sustainability in the fashion industry.

**Technological advances**

Technologies are continuously being developed and fashion and textile companies need to make good use of them to remain competitive. The main areas of development are in computer-aided design, materials and processing, green technologies and online retailing. The amount of consumers buying online is rising, which is of benefit to businesses which can more easily keep track of production management and supply chains. However, it can also be detrimental as it opens up competition as products are available to consumers worldwide. It is vital that companies and their employees have strong technical skills and keep up to date with any advances in technology (which may require additional training).

**Ageing workforce**

In comparison to the EU, the UK fashion and textiles industry has a far greater proportion (at 47%) of workers over the age of 45. The textiles sub-sector has the largest proportion of employees over the age of 45 at 54%. This aging workforce leads to the concerns of key skills and knowledge being lost when employees retire. Certain traditional and technical skills may be in short supply, such as hand and machine stitching, pattern grading and cutting, and weaving. It is therefore extremely important that the sector works to attract younger candidates with the necessary skills.

**Jargon buster**

- **Book** - portfolio of design work.
- **Branding** - creating an instantly identifiable image.
- **Collection** - twice yearly (spring/summer and autumn/winter) sample range of new designs.
- **Distribution** - supply and delivery of fashion goods to warehouses, shops and other outlets.
- **Freelance** - worker who takes on short-term assignments for a set fee or rate.
- **Haute couture** - exclusive clothes, often individually designed for private clients. Haute couture is often used to describe the work of top fashion designers but, strictly speaking, the term applies to only a handful of Paris fashion houses.
- **High end** - expensive designs below haute couture level, often produced in limited numbers.
• **Portfolio** - a collection of your best design work. This includes final, coloured sketches, swatches and finished photos of your designs. Digital design portfolios are becoming increasingly desirable.

• **Ranges** - styles and collections.

• **Samples** - the first versions of a design. Samples go through many stages from test fabrics to finished/sealed samples, which form the basis of ranges.

• **Seasons** - autumn/winter and spring/summer styles and collections.

• **Sourcing** - researching, finding and obtaining materials, trimmings and finished garments.

• **Storyboard** - (also known as a moodboard) sketches, colours, images, ideas used as the starting point for designs and collections.

• **Swatch** - small piece of fabric used to illustrate colour, print, design or detail before a piece is made or delivered.

• **Toile** - first made-up version of a garment, generally done in a cheap fabric such as muslin to test a garment or pattern.

• **Turnover** - total sales made in a given period of time.

• **Wholesale** - large quantities of goods that are sold by the designer or manufacturer to retail outlets for the latter to sell on at a higher price.