Collaboration in the Fashion Industry

By:
Anastasia Charbin

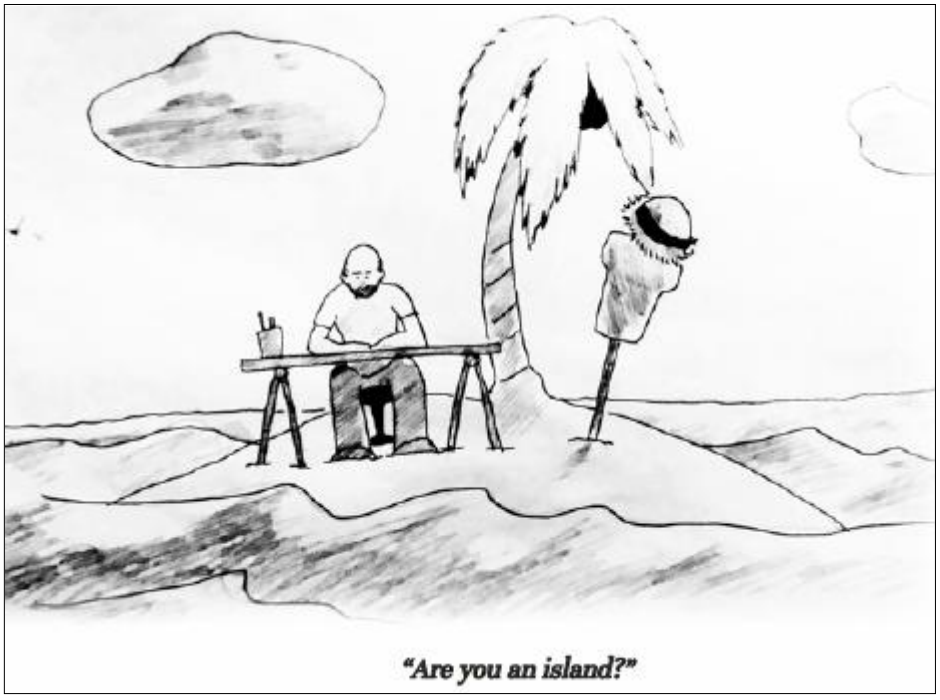
Collaboration in the Fashion Industry

By: Anastasia Charbin

Are You Stranded On A Desert Island Or Thriving In An Archipelago?

Fashion is a playground of paradox: creative and technical; art and profit; local and global. It throws a diverse set of people together to transform a creative vision into something tangible and profitable.

Unfortunately the people involved in apparel development often operate as islands. Cut off from the rest of the process, they throw their messages out to sea, hoping they make it to the right people intact. Inefficient systems and tools litter their workday and force them into tedious routines. Disconnected and overburdened, they work to do their best, but without being able to see beyond their own isolated shore, they aren't given a chance to contribute to their full potential. What if companies could build bridges between those islands?



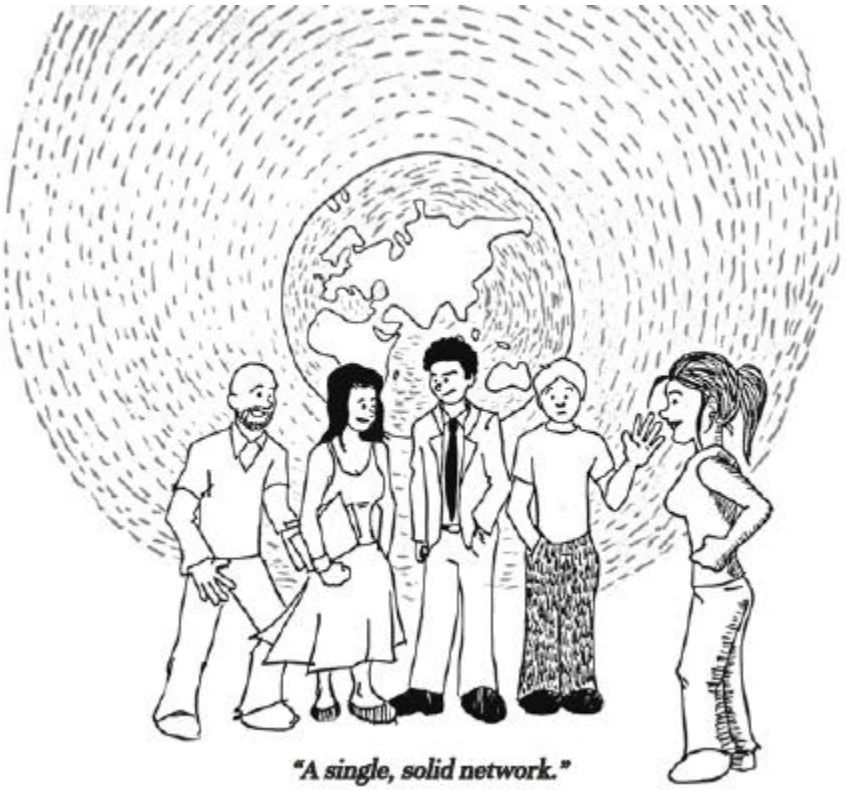
"Are you an island?"

And not just a bridge from one island to the next, but a system of bridges to form a strong, reinforced network and create community across development? Well they can. That's what it means to build collaboration into the heart of fashion development.

But What Is Collaboration Anyway?

Collaboration isn't something you do; it's something you achieve. If collaboration were a thread, it would be a three-ply formed with the strands people, tools, and process-the basic elements of product development. Collaboration unites these essentials, which is why it is so useful to addressing the apparel industry's fundamental challenges of speed, cost, and quality. Whether it's a simple change or a total process rethink, the goal of building collaboration is to turn the frustrated, overworked I into a member of the inspired, effective We.

Every One at Every Level in the Apparel Industry Faces Tough Challenges



Technology and trends may change, but the main goal of apparel companies does not: deliver the right product, at the right time, and at the right price. Time to market and cost are still tied as priorities, with quality an equally important consideration for many. Large, small, freelance, in-house, Europe, Asia, and the Americas: as far as collaboration is concerned, no one is immune to the challenges of aligning creative and technical needs, communicating huge amounts of data accurately, or responding to unpredictable economic circumstances. The consequences for late delivery, compromised design, and poor fit are the same for everyone too.

Collaboration Helps Solve Universal Problems

One word emerges again and again from conversations about collaboration: communication. It could be argued that getting information from one link in the value chain to the next is the only thing that really matters in apparel development. And how to communicate this information is deemed as or even more important that what to communicate. Communicating information—conceptual as much as technical—accurately to the right people as early in the development process as possible is by and large the most crucial factor for producing the right product, at the right time, and at the right price— otherwise, how do you know it's right?

Informed communication is intelligent communication, and without it you have no way to know how events at one stage of development will affect other stages until it's too late. Remember those isolated islands? Well, you can't manage what you can't see; when you have visibility, you have control, which means you can take action to avoid problems instead of frantically reacting to crises.

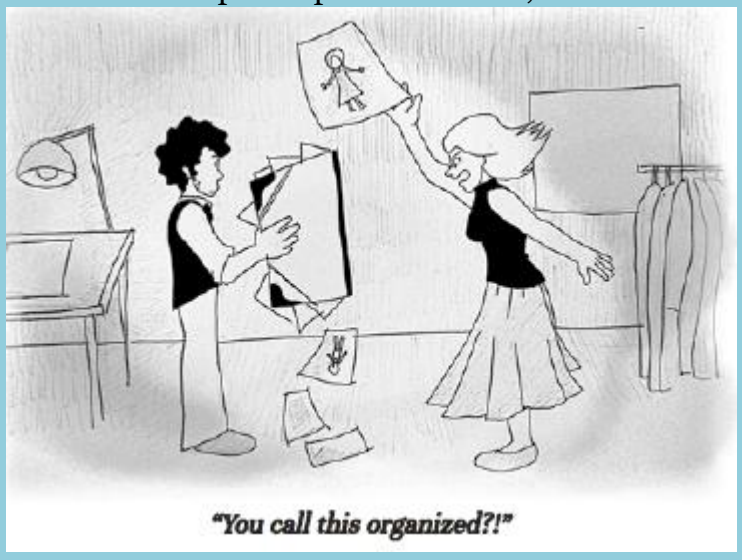
A Case of Collaboration

Without a clear message to unite teams from the beginning, each one will follow its own direction and the result will be a chaos of information and confusion. If it gets to be too

much, companies might even find themselves losing good talent, as one company discovered.

Story:

A high-end brand with a long history of craftsmanship found itself facing quality and time to market issues. They didn't have to look far to find an explanation: without a master calendar, it wasn't clear who was responsible for what decisions or when they needed to be made. Worse, information was kept in spreadsheets or, in the case of fabric swatches, piled into binders and notebooks. When a new artistic director arrived, he threatened to walk out if improvements weren't made.



"You call this organized?!"

The company knew they had a serious communication problem that stemmed from lack of organization; on top of that, they didn't have the right tools to help them manage a complex process.

Spreadsheets provided no cross-departmental visibility or way to reinforce accountability, and duplicate, conflicting validations were common; notebooks and binders found their way into cabinets and brand legacy disappeared as designers came and went.

This company needed to build collaboration on an organizational level. They found a way to focus attention back on the big picture instead of on each department's piece of the puzzle.

A Network of Priorities

In apparel development, it can be difficult to determine where one person's responsibilities end and the next person's begin, because each one is so dependent on the other for information: design can't choose fabrics without knowing the budget; pattern designers need more than a quick sketch to draft a pattern; suppliers need precise color information to deliver the right fabric. At the same time, each element- design, development, merchandising, etc. is driven by different priorities that are often in conflict with one another. Design is creative, development technically- driven, and merchandising focused on cost. When they each work separately, they fulfill their own requirements, but do they always respond to the bigger need: right product, right time, and right price?

For a long term solution to communication issues that would ultimately decrease their time to market and maintain the quality the brand is built on, the company decided to implement a PLM solution to help them manage development.

After analyzing their whole process, they established a master calendar with milestones and made sure everyone was aware of it. Information from line planning, such as financial objectives, provided constraints for product development, right from collection kickoff. Suddenly things were on time more often and it became apparent that "constraints" actually gave more flexibility to decision making: if a fabric was perfect but too expensive, product development could take a step back and see if there were other places to make adjustments, instead of being forced into a compromise. This reassured design that their creative ideas weren't being steamrolled for budget reasons.

A Single Goal

Collaborative ways of working align these differences by shepherding them toward a common goal. It starts with establishing a single vision, whether it's a new collection, a new market segment, or a whole new brand. This vision informs every other action in the process, from product definition to delivery and demands that everything- cut and color, fit, delivery dates, budget, etc.-be executed with "the big picture" in mind.

People

People are the originators of information, whether it’s a design or price. Getting that information where it needs to go is their biggest challenge.

Fashion is fast-paced and no one wants more work to slow them down. New tools and well-intentioned process change are often met with suspicion or skepticism: change is scary for most people, even if it's for the better.

Introducing new tools-especially technology-into our tried-and-true ways of working is a difficult change for many. But we are right to challenge change. This push back is what drives innovation and perfection.

Building collaboration usually implies change, either in a process or a tool. That reluctance can be overcome by proving to people the value of what you have to offer.

A colorful example:

Color is perhaps the biggest challenge in apparel development and arguably one of the most strategic. It's no secret that color is also one of the hardest elements to manage, if only for the simple reason that everyone sees color differently. Color development is an issue that every fashion company, large or small, apparel or accessories, must confront. It's also a great example of where collaboration can make a huge difference-and of the resistance people have to change.

Story:

Tim is a designer. His biggest frustration at the moment is color. Every day, Tim receives a package from a mill in Asia with fabric swatches for the season’s palette. He's never sure what the contents will look like, so he crosses his fingers and hopes that this time the red he asked for is closer to lustrous wine than a lipstick stain-lately it's been pretty hit or miss.

He knows there's a problem, but language barriers and tight deadlines make it impossible to find time to figure out the problem once and for all. For example, Tim uses a fresh Pantone color book but he can't be sure the mill's hasn't been sitting on a shelf in the sun for months. He continues to send his color requests and await the postman with a mix of curiosity and dread. So Tim and his supplier go back and forth several times, for several months at the cost of ten days and parcel post each time.

"That's not what I asked for..."

The Moral of the Story:

A top-down decree that things are going to be done differently is certainly one way of forcing people to accept change. However, forcing is not necessarily the best or the most efficient tactic. User input is a big part of initiating successful long-term change. When designers can give feedback on a new PLM system, for example, not only do they contribute to making the tool itself more effective for the overall process, but they feel engaged in the change. The introduction of new technology can be particularly stressful for some people, so creating the opportunity for engagement can help them weather the initial discomfort.

That's color development without color-specific tools or standardized process. A color-managed workflow, complete with digital color matching, can revolutionize development. But not surprisingly, resistance is common. A typical statement is "I've been assessing color for 20 years. I don't need a computer to tell me how to do it."

But when big problems draw management's attention, it's usually time to question how things are being done. Most people just need a clear explanation of how a new tool or process is in- tended to improve their lives and not rob them of their independence-and tangible proof of that. The more they can engage with the proof themselves-through running a parallel process, for example-the greater the chance they will come to trust the new system on their own.

After one too many color mishaps made their way onto the shelves, Tim's company decided to invest in color management consulting and technology. Tim was involved from the beginning. His first step was to establish a color guide-basically, an easy-to-understand set of instructions for expressing colors. Next, color standards were engineered and shared throughout development and with suppliers. Everyone was asked to respect the guidelines laid out in the color guide and to use numeric values to talk about color. Tim was curious but still skeptical about the accuracy of digital color matching. For six months, he worked a parallel process: each time a color came back, he compared it to the standard by eye and by using a spectrophotometer. Working this way, he began to see that rather than replace his judgment, this method allowed him to focus on the difficult-to-match colors earlier in the process and avoid costly exchanges with suppliers.

Tim gradually went to all-digital color matching, first with preferred suppliers and then everyone. When all was said and done, he had cut his development time by 70% and halved ship- ping costs. Because all machines and printers were calibrated, he could send and receive information nearly instantaneously and give feedback with confidence.

Tools

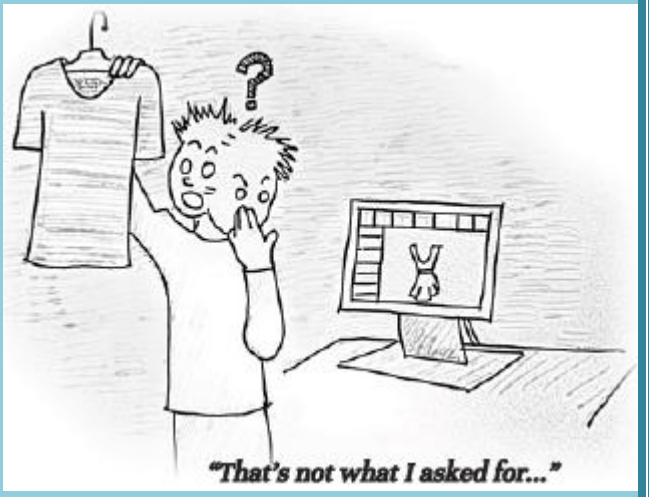
Good tools are made with process in mind; they are built to eliminate the inefficiencies that are unavoidable when working manually. But tools shouldn't add to complexity; they should help bring order to chaos and tease sense out of the tangle of information apparel professionals confront on a daily, hourly, minute-to-minute, basis. The best technology tools fit seamlessly into the user's world and speak their language.

The Right Tool for the Right Job

If you've ever started out doing something with one tool and then found out there's something better, then it might seem obvious to you that not every tool is created equal: spreadsheets for compiling technical information are hard to keep up to date; subjective verbal descriptions for communicating color confuse more often than they clarify; manual prototyping is tedious and time consuming. But most of us are under constant pressure to deliver, which doesn't leave much time for finding better solutions to problems, let alone initiating new ways of working.

Story

Jen is head of design in an accessories company that develops collections for a variety of brands, mainly in knitwear. She collaborates regularly with her customers to find the best way to balance budget constraints and design vision. Unfortunately, the pace of apparel meant that sometimes she didn't have time to get samples made and she worried every time that what her designers were presenting didn't look professional enough.



Even more troubling, she had been receiving designs back from several suppliers that were completely different from what she asked for, but it was hard to know if it was poor communication from Jen's team or bad reception supplier-side. Either way, it was costing a lot of money and contributing to a high rate of dropped styles.

Jen's company decided to invest in textile design software to harmonize how information was shared between everyone. The result was impressive: first, the software's simulations were far more realistic than what the designers had been able to do with generic image editing software, so they felt more confident presenting to customers, who in turn were more confident in investing in the designs. Collaboration between designer and customer was now happening based on reliable visual

information, so it was easier to ask questions upfront and make changes to designs before expensive samples were created.

Another strength of the software was that it compiled technical reports connected to designs that could be sent to suppliers. Now everyone received the same set of instructions, so when incoherent samples came back from one or two suppliers, Jen could get to the bottom of the problem right away and stop asking for samples from suppliers who wouldn't deliver.

Moral of the Story:

The danger of technology is that the speed and efficiency it brings can be so seductive that we forget to think about the process. Tools can't replace expertise, but they can make better use of it. The right tools help get the job done faster and leave more time for the human interactions that really make a difference: discussing the fit of a suit, agreeing on colorways, deciding of timelines are realistic. Just as human effort has its limitations, so does technology. Applying human expertise to technology is what makes a tool powerful.

When someone shows us a solution, it's like a gift: we gain time and shed the frustration that can lead to panic. Trimmed of inefficiency, our working methods actually benefit others further down the line: a product manager who keeps an updated database gives product development more flexibility to respond to budget constraints earlier in the timeline; a designer who prepares colors using numeric values takes the guesswork out of a dyer's labdip process; a pattern maker who uses 3D prototyping technology can check with design right away to see if the style is right.

Process

The most important process in apparel development is the sharing of information. This happens between design and pattern making, pattern making and prototyping, merchandisers and suppliers, suppliers and manufacturers-and back and forth between them all. They are rarely all in the same country and usually don't speak the same native language. Most of the time, the information being transferred is subjective (like color) or highly detailed (styles, patterns, technical specifications). Having a process means establishing a guiding structure and a common language to get this information from one hand to the next. Often, processes arise on their own or change as companies evolve, without formalization; unfortunately, they don't always represent the best way to do something. And more often than not, people are too busy just trying to get things done to rethink how they are doing them.

A Match Made in Heaven: Design and Pattern Making

Design and pattern making often have a love/hate relationship: they can't do without one another but they have a hard time communicating.

Story:

Greg is a designer. The company he works for has several brands, one of which he designs for. He's responsible for dozens of styles at any given time, so he's gotten used to working on three seasons at once, feeling like he's always behind. He tries to be patient, but the constant back and forth with pattern development frustrates him. The pattern designers are in a "pool" in another department. Unlike the designers, they're not assigned to a specific brand, so Greg doesn't always work with the same person. Part of his frustration stems from having to re-ex- plain his creative vision each time he works with someone new. It always seems to take an endless series of back and forth adjustments before the fit is right. And even then, it never comes back right the first time from the sample room.

"A love / hate relationship."

And on the other side...

Sandy is a pattern designer and she is equally frustrated. She loves the art of pattern design: transforming a creative idea into a technical reality. She enjoys seeing the architecture of a garment take shape onscreen but she is starting to feel certain limitations. It takes hours to make the adjustments Greg asks for and after several unsuccessful back and forth exchanges over style, it just isn't fun anymore. She feels disconnected from design, reduced to executing a series of changes that may or may not be what Greg wants. And when he finally decides on something, she still has to make sure the sample comes out right-which it never does the first time.

There are some simple ways to make the communication process more reliable and productive to get things right the first time: structure and "language" really means agreeing on the form in- formation will take; what information needs to appear in a spec pack or deciding to use numeric values to communicate color, for example.

Which language is best for communicating between people with different needs, in different countries? As any traveler knows, the best way to get an idea across in a country where you don't speak the language is to show it. That's why visual dictionaries are so convenient. The same is true for communicating information about apparel. A process based on shared visuals will yield far better communication and fewer errors.

The story of Greg and Sandy is a common one. A South African retailer faced the same challenges in their design and pattern designing departments. A small change in organization changed their whole development experience.

The first major change was material: they were still using manual pattern making methods, so pattern designers were trained on specialized pattern making software. This freed them from using unwieldy cardboard and performing tedious manual tasks. The second change was about process: the pattern pool was dismantled and pattern designers were decentralized and paired with designers. Now the two could work side by side, sharing the same vision of the brand and the customer they were working for-from the very beginning.

The seamless integration of design and development seems natural, but pattern designers weren't immediately convinced. From their point of view, they were more useful being placed closer to the sewing room where they could give support when the machinist was challenged, as often happened with the old way of doing things. But after working closely with designers, it became obvious that an accurate first pattern resulted in far fewer difficulties and workarounds in the sewing room. The machinist's challenges evaporated when the designer and pattern maker developed the right pattern the first time around.

Better Individual Process for Big-Picture Changes

A change in process in one or two departments can open new possibilities for strategic growth if the motivation comes from big-picture goals. A single change in the design room can prep the terrain for a whole new market approach.

The same South African retailer wanted to transform its development model from imitating overseas styles to igniting creative in- house design. They knew that home-grown products with distinctive style would be more popular than less original garments and they wanted to keep as much production local as possible. But to do that, they had to convince retail that they could produce stylish clothes that fit well- something they had a hard time doing in the past.


"A match made in heaven."

Before reorganizing design, the company's average time to market was 180 days. Pairing design and pattern making helped them cut lead times to 100 days and move closer to their goal of 56 days. Faster turnaround and first-time-right garments helped the company's design center convince retail that they were capable of delivering commercially viable products and that they didn't need to look overseas to be relevant.

Retail loosened the reigns a little when they saw design apply their expertise successfully and propose styles that sell. This got the entire design center excited, proving the value of process change and judicious technology use. The company's efforts to keep design and development local created jobs in a struggling apparel

industry. This drew support from the local government, which agreed to invest in new systems training.

The Moral of the Story

When individuals stop functioning in isolation, concentrating on completing a single task, and become more connected to the overall process, their own job-well-done contributes to the bigger picture. When a sound process is in place on the ground, companies can start thinking seriously about high-level strategic moves forward.

Conclusion

As we've seen, collaboration is not a one- dimensional idea. It's the result of using the right tools in a well-thought out process. Of course, people are key to this equation and the most important part of building collaborative work methods is showing people how collaboration can make their job easier.

Building collaboration is about replacing 'I' with 'We' at every stage of the apparel development process. Collaboration implies sharing and exchange from every perspective, all along the way, with the goal of making better, smarter decisions from the beginning and asking intelligent questions to direct expertise where it is most beneficial. It's about shedding light into the corners where information gets lost and helping teams get the visibility they need to go from operating blindly to making well-informed decisions and stay ahead of the game, not just keep up.

But remember, collaboration takes effort to build-and it takes a team to do it.

Further Reading

1) *Amanda J. Muhammad, Jung E. Ha-Brookshire, (2011). "Exploring job responsibilities and requirements of US textile and apparel sourcing personnel," Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management, Vol. 15 Iss: 1, pp.41 - 57.*
2) *Ramesh, D.K. Banwet, R. Shankar, (2010). "Modeling the barriers of supply chain collaboration," Journal of Modelling in Management, Vol. 5 Iss: 2, pp.176 - 193.*
3) *Helen Goworek, (2010). "An investigation into product development processes for UK fashion retailers: A multiple case study," Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management, Vol. 14 Iss: 4, pp.648 - 662.*
4) *Kerry McNamara, (2008). "The Global Textile and Garments Industry: the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in exploiting the value chain," InfoDev. www.infodev.org/en/Document.582.pdf.*
5) *"The Role of Trust in Business Collaboration: an Economist Intelligence Unit briefing paper." The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2008. http://graphics.eiu.com/upload/cisco_trust.pdf.*
6) *Sumit Kumar, (2005). "Supply chain strategies in the apparel industry: the case of Victoria's Secret," Working Paper, retrieved 10 May, 2012, from Massachusetts Institute of Technology website http://dspace.mit.edu/bitstream/handle/1721.1/33324/62314026.pdf.*
7) *Togar M. Simatupang, Ramaswami Sridharan, (2008). "Design for supply chain collaboration," Business Process Management Journal, Vol. 14 Iss: 3, pp.401 - 418.*

The stories scattered throughout this paper are fictional, but they are inspired by the experience of real apparel professionals. We would like to thank the roughly 30 individuals-designers, product managers, CAD managers, CEOs, business managers, fit engineers, color technicians, textile designers, marketing directors, and apparel educators-from countries as diverse as the United States, France, Germany, South Africa, Guatemala, and Great Britain who contributed to the project.

About this paper:

- *Kate Robinson, Editor / Research*
- *Mariam Sanoko, Art Director/Design*
- *Nathanael Negroni, Illustrations*

About Lectra:

With nearly 40 years' experience in fashion and apparel, Lectra's mission is to provide a complete spectrum of design, development, and production solutions to confront 21st-century challenges. From first creative spark to final product, our professional services address an end-to-end process. To learn how our offer for design, development, and production can help you benefit from collaboration, please contact one of our global offices.

About the Author:

Anastasia Charbin is the Marketing Director of Fashion Division at Lectra.