T-shaped Person for the Textile and Apparel Industry? Analysis of Cross-functional Skills

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The fashion industry is experiencing rapid transformation as a result of changing consumer behaviors, complex globalization, and technological innovations (Modenlak, 2019). Employers want workers who are adaptive to change, collaborative, and effective communicators within multifunctional teams (Demirkan & Spohrer, 2015). There is an increased hiring focus on soft skill attributes, in addition to role-specific expertise. The concept of a ‘T-Shaped Person’ has emerged to conceptualize and differentiate employees’ technical (T) skills from their cross-functional (CF) skills. The T-shaped person framework was introduced in 1991 to address the need for a more knowledgeable, technological, and computing employee (Gardner & Estry, 2017). In 1993, Iansiti (1993) stated that “T-shape people (...) know how their discipline interacts with others (p.138)” in the R&D setting. The T-shaped person framework remains a gap for the fashion industry. The purpose of this study is aimed at establishing the T-shaped person framework of T and CF skills needed for fashion professionals to address the industry’s evolving skill needs. To develop the fashion T-shaped person model, the study will identify employers’ needs for fashion T and CF skills. This study’s proposed framework will enable fashion academia and firms to develop and adapt curriculum and training programs specific to the needs of the fashion industry workforce.

The T-shaped person framework is used as the theoretical model for this study. Researchers have argued that T-shaped people have a broad range of limited knowledge, while at the same time, possess an expert level of very specific knowledge, and T-shaped people drive innovation in support of organizational transformation. (Kazmia & Naaranojab, 2015, p. 277). The depth of role-related T skills and the width of CF skills are represented in the T-shaped person theoretical model. Within the framework, the vertical line of the ‘T’, also referred to as the ‘I’, represents a depth of expertise in a specific knowledge domain (i.e., technical (T) skills) and the horizontal bar of the ‘T’ embodies outside of specific technical skills (i.e., cross-functional (CF) skills) (Conley et.al 2017). What would a T-shaped person look like in today’s fashion industry? Given the expressed need for fashion professionals with more diverse CF skills (Modenlak, 2019), an understanding of the characteristics of vertical and horizontal skills would be critical to preparing future professional to enter the fashion industry’s workforce.

To achieve the research objective, a content analysis of fashion industry job postings was conducted. After assessing employment posting sites, the researchers identified three sources as having the most inclusive lists of fashion positions across the supply chain and extensive lists of job qualifications and requirements. The data was collected from Indeed.com, BoF.com, (Business of Fashion), and StyleCareers.com job postings made between December 19, 2019 and

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January 27, 2020. A total of 450 US fashion postings across 13 functional job categories were collected and converted to Word documents for analysis, including but not limited to, product sourcing, designing, and operations. Skill terms present in each job posting were recorded in Excel and interpreted for context and term consistency across all 13 job categories. Skills aligning with a specific knowledge domain were categorized as T skills and abilities required outside of a role's primary expertise were categorized as CF skills, following T-shaped person framework.

Frequency of term use was analyzed in Excel to compare the characteristics between T and CF skills across job categories and total job postings.

Figure 1. Fashion industry T-shaped person framework

As shown in Figure 1, the vertical line ('I') of the framework was developed from the analysis of all job postings and those skills that were categorized as specific to the job function. The T skills ('I') were subject to requirements for specific job functions, but four skills were present in 20% or more job postings. The analysis of the T skills showed that 72% of all postings required or preferred an undergraduate degree (A), with the balance of postings having no indication of educational requirements. Box B indicates that the most commonly required T skill across all postings analyzed was Microsoft Office (61%) with the primary focus on aptitude for Excel. Software and system proficiencies were required or preferred by 32% of the postings (C). These

included PLM, SAP and other data systems. Box E shows the skill required specific to the job function which in this case is designer. CF skills required for the fashion industry established the horizontal line of the T-shaped framework. Sixteen CF skills were recorded and those mentioned in 25% or more of postings established the horizontal bar of the fashion T-shaped person. As shown in the top center box (4) in Figure 1, the most commonly required CF skill across all postings was communication (72%). This included written, verbal, presentation and listening skills. An overarching theme to the job postings was the ability to work and adapt quickly in a fast paced environment. This alludes to the need for organizational skills at 42% (3) and a high level of attention to detail at 32% (1). While retail math and business acumen were limited in mentions across all postings, over one third of the jobs required analytical skills which would include both retail math and business acumen proficiencies. The left side of the horizontal line (1, 2, 3) aligns with individual CF skills needed across all fashion job positions. The right side of the line (5, 6, 7) suggests those CF skills needed to participate across and within teams and organizations.

The study provides important contributions to fashion discipline. First, to our knowledge, this is the first analysis of job requirements using the T-shape for fashion employees. The study findings can be applied to fashion academic curriculum to guide appropriate learner assessment and preparedness for the industry's workplace. This contribution will help address the industry's need for better skilled fashion graduates. Additional research is necessary to validate those T-shaped skills most desirable within US fashion companies. Secondly, the T-shaped framework (Figure 1) provides content to assist companies with training opportunities for current and new employees. Lastly, the study was limited to US fashion job postings and a specific time period, December 2019-January 2020. The study results should be interpreted with caution given the time and geographical sensitivity. Therefore, future research broadening the geographic scope to a global perspective and evaluating data across a longer time period is recommended.

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