

Is your work wear ethical, sustainable and environmentally friendly?

The world was shocked in 2013 when the Rana Plaza (Dhaka garment factory) collapsed, killing over a thousand people and injuring more than twice that number.



As a consequence of that tragedy the business world now demands that they know, where and how their corporate uniform and workwear is sourced (fabrics and materials), manufactured, transported and stored. Ethical production is no longer a marketing buzz word, it is now a world-wide corporate commitment.

As a result there are numerous questions you have to get answered by your manufacturers and suppliers, before raising a purchase order. These questions take into consideration both your suppliers and your own

organisation's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and ethical and environmental policies.

Can you be sure that your suppliers and manufacturers have taken all health and safety precautions for their staff, their clothes are not made from hazardous materials and no one was exploited throughout the entire manufacturing process?

The business world has to establish that manufacturers have the following policies and procedures in place to ensure:

- Health & Safety compliance in the work place to ensure a safe working environment
- Procedures to minimise the impact on the local and global environment
- Commitments to the legal minimum age of employment
- Adherence to legal minimum wage, including any overtime pay, maximum hours of work, holiday entitlement and maternity leave
- Working conditions are hygienic
- No forced labour or imprisonment is used
- Employees are allowed freedom of association and collective bargaining
- Employees are not discriminated against

What does a buyer need to look for when choosing his workwear?

I am afraid that identifying whether workwear manufacturer's/supplier's practices, supply chain and products are sustainable, ethical and environmentally friendly is not simple

Sadly not all, but a large number of manufacturers and suppliers adhere to several internationally recognised guidelines to ensure ethical and social impacts of their actions are accounted for. Further details into such initiatives are identified below.

Ethical Trading Initiative

www.ethicaltrade.org

Fair Labour Association

www.fairlabour.org

Fairtrade

www.fairtrade.org.uk

Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS)

www.global-standard.org

Social Accountability International (SAI)

www.sa-intl.org

Textile Exchange

www.textileexchange.org

Organic 100

www.soilassociation.org

OEKO-TEX

www.oeko-tex.com

WRAP (Worldwide Responsible Accredited Production)

www.wrapcompliance.org

Sedex (Supplier Ethical Data Exchange)

www.sedexglobal.com

Fair Wear Foundation

www.fairwear.org

BSCI (Business Social Compliance Initiative)

www.bsci-intl.org

REACH (Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and restriction of Chemicals)

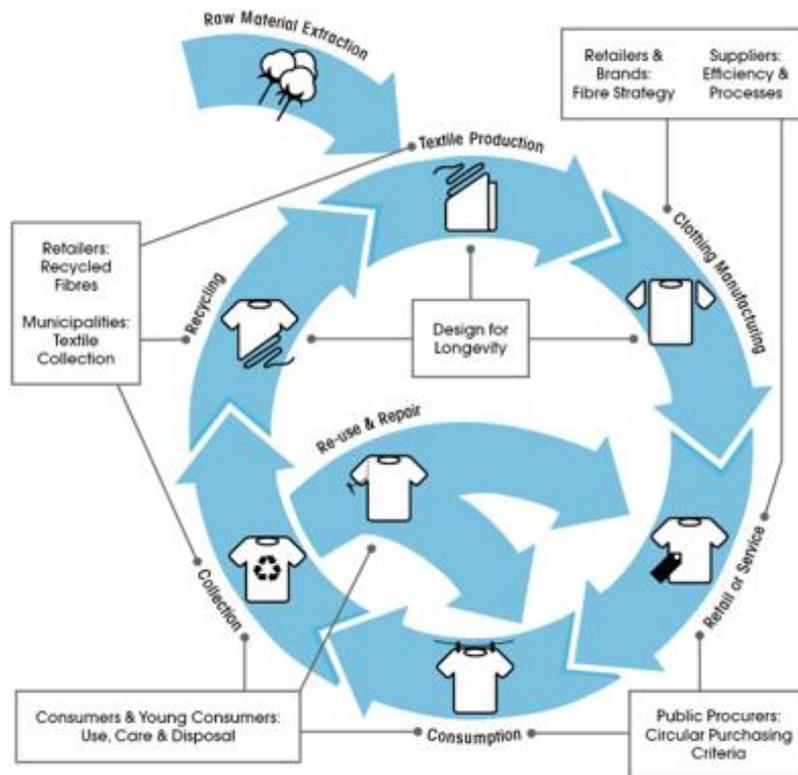
www.hse.gov.uk/reach/

Are your suppliers actively attempting to lower their carbon footprint within their production and distribution process. Do they follow industry standards with regard to renewable energy, harmful emissions, waste disposal and water usage? If they can adhere to these standards then the buyer can be assured that their purchases have been manufactured in an environmentally and socially sustainable process.

The European Clothing Action Plan (ECAP) was a pioneering project that aimed to bring environmental and economic benefit to the clothing industry across design, production, consumption,, public procurement, collection, recycling and reprocessing. It is an excellent research document available here:

<http://www.ecap.eu.com/>

The project focused on the clothing supply chain, and had 8 action areas:



Sustainable Textiles

This topic could easily be the subject of a blog post in its own right, so for this paper I will just touch on some of the new and emerging technologies currently reaching the market.

Many companies in work wear production are now committed to well designed, affordable and environmentally friendly, sustainable clothing.

Organic Cotton

Is a very popular choice if looking for sustainable products as it guarantees that no synthetic materials, genetically

modified seeds, fertilisers, pesticides and insecticides have been used and no wildlife, waterways and terrain have been damaged in the making of the garments.

It not only ensures that the environment is not damaged it is also better for the farmers health throughout production.

Linen

Linen is made from flax which is cultivated on rugged terrain that is not suitable for growing crops and requires no chemicals for production. In the past there were issues surrounding the process of converting the raw crop into fibre, which caused the pollution of waterways, but there are now a host of new production techniques which are a lot more eco-friendly.

Wool

Although sheep create an environmental issue with their production of methane, wool is a very tough and malleable textile that can hold colourful dyes without the need for chemical additives, so can replace synthetic fibres in numerous cases. It also has incredible thermal qualities for cold weather work wear.

Recycled Plastic

New techniques are emerging re-using plastic bottles and other fabrics to produce fleeces and hoodies. The production process is still very new but a number of companies are now offering clothing manufactured in this way.

Employee Relations

Are your suppliers and their manufacturers equal opportunity employers? Are they committed to ensuring within the framework of the law that their workplaces are free from unlawful or unfair discrimination on the grounds of colour, disability, race, nationality, ethnic or national origin, sex, gender (including gender reassignment), sexual orientation, age, marital status, religious or other similar philosophical beliefs?

Do they aim to ensure that their employees achieve their full potential and that all employment decisions are taken without reference to irrelevant or discriminatory criteria?

Have they adopted policies as a means of helping to achieve these aims? Is time spent training and appraising staff in their roles vital for their personal development and do they offer support to individuals with family commitments in terms of offering part time hours (where possible)?

Environmental Concerns

Understanding wider responsibilities, are your suppliers focused on reducing waste and minimising the environmental impact work practices have? Do they actively encourage office recycling throughout their premises, minimising material waste and ensuring minimal damage to the environment?

Storage and packaging

Where possible, do your suppliers and manufacturers reuse all cardboard which enters their premises for packaging and redelivery? If the cardboard is not fit for reuse is it recycled through a third party? Where new boxes are used, do they promote reuse to customers? Do they recycle all plastic and look to minimise their impact on the environment wherever possible? Do their systems ensure efficient storage, order picking and packaging to maximise space and ensure wastage of resources is kept to a minimum?

Environmental Objectives

- Minimising waste generation
- Reducing the consumption of energy
- Sourcing sustainable new materials and packaging
- Minimising emissions to air, land and water

- Improving the awareness and training of employees in environmental best practice.

Distribution

When a commercial delivery service is used do they conform to an environmental policy and measure success in six key areas:

- 1) CO2 emissions,
- 2) Waste,
- 3) Paper usage and re-usage
- 4) Recycling
- 5) Energy consumption of buildings
- 6) Work accidents.

Do they use SMS technology to find out if recipients are available to sign for goods and so achieving more 'right first time' deliveries rather than making wasted journeys?



Summary

Companies around the world are striving to ensure that their work wear is ethical, sustainable and environmentally friendly with full traceability, identifying the origination of their products and the validity of the component supply chains, covering those suppliers who assemble their offerings as well as all fabrics, accessories and processes included in the manufacturing techniques.

It has taken many years to reach this point and there is still a lot to do, by the industry as a whole, but also the product buyers themselves.

Richard Woollam

Director

Wear4Work Limited

www.wear4work.org