

Interviews

ITMF: Apparel supplier megastorm on lack of demand, high costs

International Textile Manufacturers Federation (ITMF) secretary general Dr. Christian P. Schindler tells Just Style AI is a priority as apparel producer price increases and geopolitical issues create a rocky global environment that hasn't been seen for at least 40 years.

Laura Husband | September 17, 2024

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ITMF secretary general Christian Schindler tells Just Style innovation is key to overcoming high supplier costs. Credit: ITMF.

During the ITMF's final dinner to commemorate the success of its annual 2024 conference in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, Schindler tells Just Style the geopolitical situation has changed dramatically for

geopolitical situation has changed dramatically for textiles and apparel.

The supply chain that existed five years ago is now in danger with fashion sourcing executives having to look for alternatives as costs have increased everywhere.

He explains: “The world has become so complex lately, which means you have to team up with multiple partners.”

AI and digitalisation needed to tackle complex supply chain

Covid disrupted the supply chain with digitalisation being expected both up and downstream and he describes it as being “very complex”.

Schindler adds that AI is growing as a priority and the apparel sector needs long term partnerships as a single year collaboration is just “not good enough”.

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[Explainer: What will Nike’s future hold under new CEO Elliott Hill](#)

When the conversation turns to whether the conference was a success, Schindler responds nonchalantly: “It’s not for me to answer”.

Our conversation, which took place at the quieter end of a buzzing long table filled with ITMF members in a grand dining room in Samarkand’s Eternal City, was days in the making.

Schindler was constantly in demand between sessions

and spent the live sessions ensuring everything went to plan, alongside his co-host the International Apparel Federation's secretary general Mattihjs Criete.

Now he can finally relax, it's clear he's confident the event's schedule gave participants plenty of insights and ideas.

Plus, he says: "From a networking perspective – old friends reunited, new friends were made and the sessions offered solutions to industry-wide problems while helping to strengthen the sector's wider network."

He continues that in his mind it was a success if people took away some ideas and felt motivated and inspired by the solutions on offer to fix our sector's problems and strengthen our network.

Host country shows apparel sector change in action

Schindler is quick to highlight the benefits that this year's host country brought to the conference as well.

He notes the delegates learned a lot about Uzbekistan – a country that might have had a lot of question marks for anyone who had not visited before.

[He highlights attendees were impressed by the security level, the country's cleanliness, its organisation as well as its growing textile and apparel industry.](#)

"The president has turned his country around and I haven't seen that anywhere else before apart from China. However, China took longer as it didn't turn around until the nineties and noughties after opening

in eighties.”

Uzbekistan’s transformation on the other hand has happened in less than 10 years. Of course, he adds the country has to build a network to conquer the market in the west, but it’s important to remember it has only been in the business for two years and is already showcasing good examples and practices.

ITMF on impact of incoming apparel regulation

This year’s conference theme was ‘innovation, cooperation & regulation – key drivers of the textile & apparel industry,’ but it was arguably regulation that was given the greatest amount of airtime.

Schindler explains the ITMF has observed regulation is finally becoming a mainstream topic on the conference agenda.

“We started covering regulation at ITMF two years ago and this year we had four presentations as there’s a lot of regulation in the pipeline so manufacturers need to be aware of what’s hitting them. They need to prepare for that scenario as otherwise they won’t be able to survive.”

He sees it as encouraging that representatives from regional apparel and textile organisations are talking to each other on an open stage and are keen to harmonise on regulation.

He clarifies that Europe is moving quickly on regulation but it’s promising the American Apparel & Footwear Association (AAFA) can see the merits of the US doing it in a similar way.

Innovation was also a key theme and he observes that in the last few years innovation related to recycling and sustainability has taken centre stage: “Anything that reduces greenhouse gas emissions and fossil fuel consumption and water is of course important and that’s why we introduced the ITMF Start-Up award, the Innovation and Sustainability award and the International Cooperation award. These three awards really are at the centre of the industry and are relevant for the whole supply chain.”

What’s next for ITMF and textile, apparel sector?

The ITMF will continue its work on providing sector insights for its members in terms of market predictions, international cost comparisons and shipment statistics.

Schindler highlights the ITMF produces a regular global industry survey that covers the whole supply chain, including apparel and all global regions. Plus, the organisation conducts a webinar on AI for the textile and apparel industry to understand its possibilities.

He explains: “It provides members with background information on AI but also the best practices for our industry. AI is not just for the designers but it is also for producers and the upstream part of the supply chain to reduce costs and provide new revenue streams.”

The biggest challenge facing the wider industry, according to Schindler is demand. He shares: “We all know there will be an end to it sooner or later, but it means the sector needs to be more open to innovation

means the sector needs to be more open to innovation that will allow it to ask for higher prices.

“Of course, not everyone can be super innovative as you have to invest in innovation and create unique products and services and possibly set prices yourself which is easier said than done.”

But, he maintains that innovative products will allow the sector to ask for higher prices and given apparel prices have decreased in real terms and even in nominal terms and we're one of the only industries where everything has got cheaper, innovation will be crucial.

Investment is also potentially available with Schindler adding it was encouraging to see the International Finance Corporation, which is part of the World Bank tell attendees that is providing a lot of resources and has funding accessible to SMES (small to medium-sized businesses).

In difficult times when margins are zero it's easy to assume only companies with deep pockets can move forward with innovation, but as Schindler concludes: “There will be some first movers but eventually the innovation will become mainstream,” so the hope is the wider industry will all benefit.

And on that closing note of optimism, we ended our formal chat, finished eating Uzbekistan's signature dish (palov) and joined his fellow members on the dancefloor.

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