

[An Investigation of Women's Early Career Experiences in the Textile and Apparel Industries](#)

By: [Nancy Hodges](#), [Elena Karpova](#), Holly Lentz

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Abstract:

The experiences of female graduates of textile and apparel programs in the early stages of their industry careers were examined using two methods: (1) a questionnaire completed by textile and apparel companies, and (2) interviews with women employed in industry jobs for < 5 years. The questionnaire results revealed that the number of female employees was highest in wage/staff and midlevel positions and the number of male employees was highest in salaried and high-level positions. Interview data showed that participants had a high level of job satisfaction and valued the knowledge gained by acquiring a degree in textiles and apparel. About half of the participants found their first full-time job through internships. Others said that informal networking led to their first job. Participants stressed the importance of understanding "politics" in the workplace. Those in smaller companies reported assuming greater responsibilities and having more freedom to make decisions.

Keywords: career development | employment | higher education | textile and apparel industries

Article:

Employment in the U.S. textile and apparel industries dropped sharply between 1997 and 2007, going from 1.38 million to 752,000. This represented an overall decline of approximately 45% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). For the last several decades, the United States has witnessed a reduction in its manufacturing base across a range of industries. For the textile and apparel industries, the reduction is often attributed to loosening trade regulations and greater global economic integration. As a result, much attention has been paid to investigating how trade blocs and other changes, such as the phase-out of the Multifiber Arrangement, have affected industry health and competitiveness (Cammett, 2006; Curran, 2007). Such research focuses primarily on dynamics in imports, exports, and production, as well as overall employment trends (Kilduff & Chi, 2006; Scott, 2006).

It is often thought that trends in textile and apparel industry employment have affected only those who are directly involved in the manufacturing process (Hussain, Mahmood, & Choudry, 2002), and that non manufacturing jobs, specifically those that require a college degree, remain immune (Kessler, 2002). Manufacturing job loss has received most of the publicity, with little attention paid to the extent to which professional jobs, whether design or marketing-related, supervisory or administrative, may be affected. Likewise, it is known that women are as likely to be impacted by employment dynamics within the manufacturing side of textiles and apparel as men (Hodges & Karpova, 2006), but the extent to which they are impacted by white-collar dynamics is not known. An understanding of gender relative to white-collar industry employment is important for 4-year degree programs that prepare graduates to work in the textile and apparel industries because these programs have large female enrollments.

To address a gap in the literature, this research explores the experiences of female graduates of textile and apparel programs in the early stages of their careers in the textile and apparel industries. For this study, the textile and apparel industries are defined based on the North American Industrial Classification System (NAICS). Specifically, this study focuses on employment at businesses classified as NAICS 313 (Textile Mills), NAICS 314 (Textile Products Mills), and NAICS 315 (Apparel Manufacturing). The experiences of graduates are examined within the context of regional industry employment demographics to understand what it is like to build an industry career. Specific questions guiding the research include: What types of industry jobs do women have, and particularly those with college degrees? What types of workplace opportunities and challenges do they encounter? Do they think that having a degree in textiles and apparel has been important to their success?

Background

Industry Employment Dynamics

This study focuses on areas of the textile and apparel industries targeted by many textile and apparel degree programs. Therefore, it includes job types that range from product

development to marketing and merchandising. In 1982, Woodruff and McDonald wrote that of the 10 M's that were most important to the textile and apparel industries—manpower, material, machinery, money, mill engineering, mill management, manipulation, maintenance, marketing, and merchandising—only the last three, along with money, remained as part of the U.S. industry. The other six, accounting for supplies, labor, and supervision, had already moved to countries with inexpensive labor. It has been suggested repeatedly that even in the face of the global relocation of textile and apparel production, the merchandising and marketing components of the industries will likely remain in the United States.

Many argue that design, marketing, and merchandising have been crucial to the survival of companies, and subsequently jobs, because it is believed that products targeted to the U.S. consumer are best designed and marketed in the United States, though they may be manufactured elsewhere (Barret, 2000; Hines, 2001; Zingraff, 1991). This perspective is consistent with Mittelhauser's (1997) study, which predicted that by 2005, only those jobs requiring more education would remain stable. Yet Mittelhauser and others have not examined the implications such shifts might have for certain groups of workers, including women. Moreover, although some studies have examined the number of women in higher level positions within these industries (Marshall, 2001; McCurry, 1994; Ryan, 1998), few examine the role of education relative to the types and levels of employment attained by women. In this study, this gap is addressed through an investigation of factors such as education level, job type, and salary. These factors provide a context for exploring the experiences of individuals with an industry-specific type of degree, textiles and apparel, who are in the early stages of their careers.

Women's Labor

Women have worked to produce textile and apparel goods since before the advent of the Industrial Revolution, and there has long been an association between the production of these goods and the lives of women (Barber, 1994). This association became more pronounced when women began attaining postsecondary degrees, as the increasing numbers of women attending college fed the newly formed areas of study deemed appropriate for women, one of which was textiles and apparel. Since then, there has been no shortage of women with textile and apparel degrees. Women have even been overrepresented in such programs (Avery, 1989). In contrast, they have been consistently underrepresented in upper levels of industry employment, while comprising the majority within jobs that do not require a college degree (Fink & Reed, 1994; Glass, 1992).

Production jobs in textiles and apparel have been held largely by women. When textile mills first began operation, they employed mostly young women, many of whom were newly immigrated to the United States (Chapkis & Enloe, 1983). Girls and young women continued to dominate the mill work force after 1860, comprising nearly three quarters of this labor force throughout the latter part of the 19th century (Glass, 1992). This trend continued through the 1980s, when approximately half of the employees at the majority of U.S. mills were women. At

the end of the 20th century, the apparel manufacturing industry was still one of the largest employers of women in the United States (Racine, 1996). Women have continued to enter the workforce in greater numbers into the 21st century (Meece, 2006), with many choosing to start their own businesses (Marshall, 2001).

Women employed in midlevel and white-collar salary jobs is a relatively recent phenomenon, and one that is reflective of the increasing number of women in the industry workforce with college degrees (McCurry, 1994). Yet, even though the number of women enrolled in business schools and production management degree programs has increased since the 1970s (Jarnow & Dickerson, 1997; McCurry, 1994), by the end of the 20th century, only one female was cited among a list of the 35 most highly paid executives in the apparel industry nationwide (Ryan, 1998). Moreover, as Daniel (2004) explains, “Despite the fact that women make up 51% of the U.S. population and represent about 46% of the workforce, as of 2000, women represented only 12.2% of the corporate officers among all 500 Fortune companies . . .” (p. 56). Although large numbers of college-educated women enter the workforce, the paths that their careers take are not clear. Nor is it clear whether college major (i.e., textiles and apparel, business, economics, engineering) has significance for women’s career development within these industries.

Given expectations of a challenging global economic climate, a downward employment trend is predicted to continue and expected to translate into an industry job loss as high as 46% through 2014 (Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2007). To what extent will women be impacted by these losses, and in turn, to what extent will such losses impact students’ perceptions of the value of a degree in textiles and apparel? Hodges and Karpova (2005) revealed that students feel some apprehension about their chosen professional path because other fields are perceived to be more lucrative. Similarly, Kim and Johnson (2007) found that students anticipate continued change as a constant relative to the future of textiles and apparel. Because most of these students are female, it is important to understand where women are within the industry and how they establish themselves as professionals during the early stages of their careers. In the same vein, it is important to examine factors that women think contributed to their success in being able to secure and retain a job in this turbulent industry.

Methodology

Data Collection

Data were collected in two phases. In Phase I, a short questionnaire was mailed to 110 textile and apparel related companies located within the southeastern United States representing the three NAICS categories comprising the focus of this study (NAICS 313, 314, and 315). The questionnaire—to be completed by a human resource professional within the company—requested a brief description of the company (i.e., products or services provided) and a description of the employment structure of the company (i.e., departments, job ranks,

employment tiers). Also included on the questionnaire was the total number of people employed by the company, and of this number, the total number of women. The respondent was asked to indicate the number of women employed by the company that hold a 4-year degree or higher. They were then asked to classify the number of male and female individuals within each salary range and job title, as well as within each tier/rank.

Phase II of data collection involved conducting in-depth interviews with 14 women employed in professional industry jobs for < 5 years. Time at their current job ranged from 18 months to just over 4 years. All were working for companies classified as either NAICS 313, 314, or 315 at the time of the interviews and held a variety of positions, including jobs in product development, planning, merchandising, marketing, and product flow analysis. All were college graduates with degrees in textiles and apparel from two universities located in the southeastern United States. One-third worked for private companies and two-thirds worked for public corporations. Because the questionnaire did not ask for company name, only NAICS code (for the purposes of confidentiality), matches between companies represented by the participants interviewed and those represented by the questionnaire were not made. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms are used in place of real names. Table 1 provides information about the participants.

Table 1. Participant Name, Company North American Industrial Classification System (NAICS), and Job Type

<i>Name</i>	<i>Classification</i>	<i>Job type</i>
Rita	NAICS 313	Designer/Product Development
Sara	NAICS 315	Planner/Merchandiser
Rene	NAICS 315	Merchandiser
Dana	NAICS 315	Product Flow Analyst
Ashley	NAICS 314	Marketing Specialist
Sandra	NAICS 313	Designer/Product Development
Mandy	NAICS 315	Marketing Specialist
Hannah	NAICS 315	Training Specialist
Susan	NAICS 313	Research Engineer
Cary	NAICS 315	Merchandiser
Beth	NAICS 315	Merchandiser

Samantha	NAICS 313	Designer/Product Development
Tara	NAICS 313	Designer/Product Development

Interviews were conducted with Institutional Review Board approval from the researchers' universities and audio-taped with participant permission. Each interview lasted between 1 and 3 hr. The interview consisted of 14 open-ended questions. Participants were asked to describe their current job title and responsibilities, how long they had held the position as well as what they liked and did not like about it. Other questions pertained to their experiences with getting their first industry job, with making career-related decisions like seeking promotions, as well as other types of career path topics. Participants were asked to share their career goals for the next 10 years.

Both phases of data collection took place prior to the current economic recession and focused on the southeastern region of the United States. Although the fashion industry is largely concentrated in the New York and Los Angeles areas, a significant proportion of the industry is still based in the southeast. Indeed, despite losses in the textile and apparel manufacturing base, several hundred companies remain in business in this part of the country (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). In 2006, approximately one out of every three jobs in these industries existed in Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina (Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2007). North Carolina was the leader with 15% of the jobs, while Georgia and South Carolina, combined, accounted for 18% of all jobs.

Data Analysis

Questionnaire responses were analyzed for descriptive information. Interviews were transcribed and then analyzed for similarities and differences across participants' experiences. The analysis began with an in-depth examination of participant responses through an iterative part-to-whole process (Spiggle, 1994). Distinct themes emerged from the responses through a phenomenological interpretation of the data (van Manen, 1990). These themes linked the women's experiences together and highlighted the commonalities among them. The thematic interpretation of the interviews provides depth and context to frame the results of the questionnaire.

Interpretation

Questionnaire Results

A total of 2,504 employees, 1,433 men and 1,071 women, working at 27 companies were represented by the questionnaire data (a 24% response rate). Size of companies ranged from 12 to 250+ employees. Eleven companies were classified as NAICS 313 (e.g., textile manufacturers,

yarn production), seven companies were classified as NAICS 314 (e.g., fiber production), and nine companies were classified as NAICS 315 (e.g., apparel manufacturers, cut and sew). Job types represented by the companies include manufacturing, product development, merchandising, marketing, clerical, and management, and were classified as upper-, midlevel, and wage/staff. The largest difference between the number of female and male employees was found in the NAICS 313 category (782 males and 485 females).

Of the total number of female employees from the questionnaires, the overall percentage with 4-year college degrees (type not specified) was 4.35%. Degrees were most often held by women employed by companies that had between 150 and 250 total employees. Textile manufacturers reported the highest number of women with degrees at 8.25%. The second highest were the apparel manufacturers, with 4.25% of female employees holding college degrees. The lowest number was found among the cut and sew companies, which reported no female employees with college degrees.

The total number of employees by job class revealed 135 men in upper-level positions and 127 in midlevel positions. A total of 29 women were reported in upper-level positions, comprising roughly 17% of the total in this category. A total of 59 women were reported in midlevel positions, totaling about 32% in this category. In contrast, 91% of the total number of employees in wage/staff positions from all company sizes and types were women. The wage/staff category included office, technical, and custodial jobs. Salaries indicated for upper-level positions started at \$60,000 a year, those in the middle category ranged from \$40,000 to 60,000, and the wage/staff pay (nonsalaried positions) included anything up to \$30,000 a year.

Women accounted for the largest percentage of the total number of employees in the lowest paid job category—wage/staff—regardless of company type or size. Men accounted for the largest number of salaried positions within the companies surveyed. In job categories that included salary, the higher the salary in terms of job type, the smaller the percentage of women. The ratio of male to female employees was the most even within the midlevel category, which included marketing and product development related positions, such as merchandisers or lead designers. Overall, the total number of female versus male employees is somewhat even. However, when the numbers are categorized by job level—and then compared to corresponding salary ranges—it was apparent that the majority of women were employed in low- and midlevel positions. In the next section, the question of what it is like to forge an industry career is addressed.

Interview Themes

Interpretation of the interview responses led to the development of three emergent thematic areas connecting commonalities and differences among participants' responses: Landing the First Job, Life in the Trenches, and A Job versus a Career. Within these emergent themes, key issues further explain participants' experiences within the textile and apparel workplace.

Landing the first job. Participants were asked to talk about their experiences with finding their first “real” industry job. Participants described the lengths they went to get hired, often discussing the anxieties and frustrations that came along with this initial job search. However, participants’ anxieties did not necessarily disappear once they landed the job, in that the need to learn what it would take to do the job was also a much discussed topic during the interviews.

Participants pointed to having an internship as being the easiest way to secure a job in the industry after graduation. About half of the participants found their first full-time job via this route. For example, Beth, who was looking for a job for more than a month after completing her degree, finally decided to “get her foot in the door” by applying for an internship,

“I was panicking about finding a job. A lot of companies do not post [job announcements] outside, so you just have to send letters and you don’t know if these people need anybody, or who is the right person to contact. I finally gave up finding a real job and just sent one in for an internship, and through that I got the job.”

Similarly, Samantha was offered a job by the company she was interning for once the internship was over. However, participants were quick to point out that finding an internship can often be as difficult as finding a job.

Each of the participants expressed gratitude and relief about being able to work in the industry they had targeted as students. Participants often described getting to the point of questioning whether they would find industry work at all, and many, like Rene, contrasted their good fortune with some of their former classmates who had yet to find industry jobs.

“[A] friend of mine graduated the same time I did, and she can’t even get a job at Walmart. Nobody’s hiring. She has experience. But she can’t get a job. Walmart told her she’s overqualified. And I’ve been trying to help network with her . . . and network with people to even try to find her a retail [store] position.”

Connections with others via the kind of informal networks Rene describes surfaced frequently in participants’ description of the initial job search. Such a connection was what helped Rene find her first job:

“It took me six months to get the job [after graduation]. I was so depressed. A friend of mine was in a contractor position at [company name]. And I just ran into her and told her I was looking for a job. I sent her my résumé, and within six months they called me back. I took her position.”

These informal networks appeared to involve female contacts each time. In some cases the networking was deliberate, in others, such as in Tara’s case, it was by chance.

“When you just start a job, a lot of companies expect you to know how to deal with people on a regular basis, like, dealing with fabric suppliers. I mean, these people have been in the industry for a long time, they are used to being very business oriented, and, you know, straight about everything. So, you just have to know how to deal with people. And we weren’t really taught that [in school].”

Overall, the participants reflected on this period in their lives and careers as a time of great frustration and anxiety; a time when they had to be not only resourceful in getting the job, but in making sure that they could do it well. As Rita said, “A lot of times there isn’t somebody there to help you. So it’s [about] being able to rely on yourself and rely on what you know.” Ultimately, participants acknowledged that this time in their lives allowed for tremendous personal and professional growth and was a necessary first step in developing the industry careers they hoped for as college students.

Life in the trenches. When asked to talk about what they experienced in the day-to-day of their jobs, navigating the political waters of their respective workplaces was one of the more commonly talked about necessities. Encountering other challenges, such as the tedium of the job and being passed over for promotions, also surfaced frequently. These challenges were often discussed as precursors to what participants enjoyed most about the companies they work for, and that overcoming such hurdles ultimately helped to build self-confidence.

There was consensus among participants about the extent to which corporate culture is political and difficult to navigate, especially for newcomers. Participants had to learn how to wade through the interrelationships and recognize the power differentials as quickly as any of the other skills required of the work. As Mandy explains,

“There’s a lot of politics and you kind of have to learn to communicate and interact with people. And if you don’t have somebody there to say “This is acceptable” and “This is not acceptable,” you’ll learn real quick, you know. Being able to communicate, I think that’s huge in a corporate environment.”

Participants believed that company size had some bearing on the extent to which office politics dictated workplace behavior. For example, when comparing her previous experiences while working at a large corporation with those of her current job at a smaller, privately owned company, Sandra explained that in the corporate world people are more often judged not by their professional abilities and performance, but rather by whom they socialize with.

“This company is not as political. I don’t know any other way to describe it. Once you’ve been in corporations, [you know] it’s extremely political. You are always aiming to please people just to please them. And with this company . . . you’re recognized on how you perform, not necessarily who you know; and how you do things, not [how you] socialize. You would think that was such a small, insignificant thing, but it’s actually huge.”

Participants noted how the type of company one works for directly impacts their role within the broader work context. That is, participants, like Sandra, who worked for smaller companies reported assuming greater responsibilities, seeing direct outcomes of their work and having more freedom to make decisions, when compared to those, like Mandy, who worked for a very large corporation.

“I’ve done things for this [small] company that I would never have been able to do if I worked for [corporation 1] or [corporation 2]. For example, presenting to Walmart. I mean, that’s not something that someone with my experience would be allowed to do. (Sandra)

It’s very corporate . . . structured and boxed in. We have to have it approved by so many people, and so many people have to be involved in it. It gets kind of bogged down with people, and so many people working on it. (Mandy)”

In large corporations, contributions made by individuals were less evident, consequently participants reported feeling unimportant and inadequately recognized for doing their jobs. In contrast, participants employed by small companies experienced greater interconnections between themselves and the company, as well as a greater overall level of involvement with the company.

Being female in the textile and apparel industry workplace was seen as a challenge by most of the participants. The majority of participants had male supervisors and all but 2 worked in companies where the upper-level positions were held only by men. Hannah describes the gender breakdown at the company she had recently left:

“About 20% of the company’s employees were male. But out of that 20%, I’d say 10% were warehouse people. So, forget about them. Whatever male that you saw walking around in that company had [some kind of] senior-level position, [whether] VP, President, CEO. And it was the other 80%, the women, [who] were actually doing all the work.”

Some participants had experienced the gender disparity. Susan recalled an instance when she felt gender came into play during a project where she believed her leadership efforts were largely ignored.

“When I started at [company name], I was the first R&D female manager in the company, and that was challenging because they were just used to listening to men, you know. I remember one of my first projects. The guy, VP, came to the plant, and it was my project, I had done all the work on it, I’d been working on this for four months straight, everyday. And he talked to the guy who helped me once in a while, but never even looked at me. There was that lack of respect for women and that was very frustrating.”

Some described how they experienced workplace marginalization when they were passed over for promotions they believed they should have received. For instance, Sandra expressed frustration as she recalled a time when she felt that she was deliberately overlooked,

“I had a situation when I was ready to be promoted to the next position. I was told I was ready. Well, they put a male in the position who didn’t have a textile degree. He had no experience. He had to be trained how to do the job. It was, like, a six-month learning curve for him. And I was doing his job but not getting promoted and not getting paid for it.”

Even participants who had not experienced such marginalization perceived their chances for promotion to upper-level jobs to be lower than that of their male counterparts. As Cary explains, “If I ever wanted to become a Director, it would be to my disadvantage that I’m a woman.”

Some participants had a different perspective on the issue. For instance, Sara, who had worked at three different companies, believed that the gender balance was shifting.

“It was definitely a “good old boy industry” when I first started. Ladies had more of the assistant, secretary-type jobs. And the guys had the big marketing jobs, the VP jobs. But now, it’s amazing to see the amount of females who are quickly climbing up the corporate ladder. And just the opportunities that are open that even when I came into the industry weren’t open. I’ve seen a major change from what I witnessed at the very beginning of my career to where it is now.”

Despite some of the negative experiences they had dealt with, all of the participants reported being satisfied with their current jobs. All acknowledged that every job consisted of some tasks that were exciting and fulfilling and some that were not. As Sara puts it, “Being creative, the last thing you want to do is to sit in front of an Excel spreadsheet. But that’s the nature of the beast. You have to do the boring things to get to do the exciting things.”

Participants’ satisfaction with their jobs was reflected in the confidence they had in their ability to do them well. Many talked about the satisfaction of working in an industry where they could see the process of making something, such as a textile product or a garment, come to completion. As Ashley pointed out,

“I think that you’re in control of your own destiny. You can make yourself be successful or not at [a] job, no matter where you work . . . And you may not like it, but you can still do a good job at it.”

A job versus a career. While they were asked to talk about their goals for the future, they were also asked to reflect on whether having a degree in textiles and clothing would help them to

achieve these goals. The extent to which participants value their degrees was a repeated subject of conversation during the interviews and points to the difference they see between getting an industry job and building an industry career.

Participants repeatedly talked about how important product-based courses have been to their workplace success. College courses that participants cited as the most useful, and the most beneficial, were those that involved the knowledge and skills that they rely on most often to perform day-to-day work responsibilities. Quite often participants acknowledged that some courses that were their least favorite in school turned out to be the most useful and important on the job. In this respect, sourcing-related courses were most often mentioned, which is not surprising, given the increasing globalization of the industry. As Beth pointed out,

“I had a class in sourcing but at the time I was, like, “I’m never going to use this.” I just didn’t see how it was applicable. But now I really wish I paid more attention so I would know what terms mean. I think it would be good to know the regions of the world and what they specialize in and what, you know, is the best place to get this from or that, or what their cultures are like.”

Participants also believed that those transferable skills obtained as the result of team projects and/or presentations, or putting together trend boards, have been essential to doing their jobs well. And, some thought it gave them an advantage over those with business degrees:

“In school we had so many presentations, and just having to research and pull all that information together. I really feel that I have a very strong background in that. And when I compare myself to any business major that’s coming out of college, they don’t have the [product] presentation background behind them, while I could go into any retailer and feel very comfortable with what I was doing. (Sara)”

It was interesting to note that all of the participants intended to continue to work, in whatever capacity, as they enjoyed what they do and the industry that they work in. Also although none of the participants had children at the time of the interviews and a few were married or intended to get married in the near future, the topic of leaving the workplace to have a family was not common. Instead, they intended to continue with their careers.

For two-thirds of the participants, owning their own business was something they aspired to do eventually. Owning a retail store was the most common goal. Some, and especially those with design skills, looked to a time when they would not only own the store, but make the product sold in it. Those who did not envision an entrepreneurial future planned to stay in the corporate world and expected to work their way up to the top. For example, Susan planned to move up to the top level of the company she worked for, where, at the time of the interview, there were no females. She hopes to change this and sees her career path as being as much about her personal goals as it is about forging new ground for her gender: “At [company name], there’s

no female VP, or anything like that. So, I want to be that one. That's my goal. I want to be the woman that makes it there."

Discussion and Implications

This research addressed the question of what graduates with degrees in textiles and apparel experience once they enter the industry workforce. On the whole, participants were satisfied with their jobs and enjoyed working in the industries that they went to college to learn about. Those employed by private enterprises expressed a greater connection with and feeling of importance to their company as compared to those who worked for large corporations. This finding supports previous research on job satisfaction (Dee, Crutsinger, & Kim, 2006; Falcone, 1991) and particularly as it relates to productivity. Job satisfaction is likely to result in higher motivation, which, in turn, may lead to higher productivity and better overall work performance (Balfour & Wechsler, 1991). The dynamic nature of the textile and apparel industries also contributed to participants' overall job satisfaction. A frequent response was that of appreciation that the job was never routine, mirroring a study by Paulins (2008) that, though it focused on textile and apparel students' experiences with internships, indicated higher satisfaction when they were involved in a greater variety of job-related activities.

Participants were unanimous in the belief that corporate culture is overpoliticized and that one's success depends more on internal politics and social skills than on job-related knowledge and expertise. At the same time the participants had learned to maneuver through the politics of their respective workplaces to maintain employment within a volatile industry. All intended to continue with their careers for the long-term and had no plans to leave the career to raise a family. Some planned to move up within their companies and seize the opportunities that would arise as they gained more experience. Two-thirds hoped to eventually start their own businesses. This finding is in line with Daniel's (2004) conclusions that many women in the United States are setting out on their own to become entrepreneurs instead of remaining in the corporate world.

Participants' experiences with getting their first real industry jobs illustrate the challenge of securing a position, regardless of one's gender, in an industry that has been in employment decline for more than a decade. Participants acknowledged the full extent of this challenge and felt fortunate to be building professional careers related to their college major. They contrasted themselves with former classmates who had yet to find industry work. According to the participants, one of the best ways to get an industry job was through an internship. This finding is interesting in light of existing research on typical non industry-specific job search methods (e.g., Mau & Kopischke, 2001; Sagen, Dallam, & Laverty, 1999), which does not report internships as a commonly used strategy to secure postgraduation employment. It was apparent that internships were helpful in the job search as experienced by the textile and apparel graduates in this study. Therefore, internships appear to be one of the most critical opportunities for those interested in getting into these industries.

While participants know they must work their way up, some expressed they had experienced a certain amount of invisibility as compared to their male counterparts. Therefore, consideration of one's gender in the workplace was an important issue for the participants. According to the participants, in the companies where they were currently employed, the majority of upper-level positions were held by men, while entry- and midlevel positions were held primarily by women. Likewise, according to the results of the questionnaire, women have a significant presence within the areas of the textile and apparel industries included in the three targeted NAICS categories. However, this presence was strongest in wage/staff and midlevel positions. The question is why.

The answer may lie in perceptions of the knowledge and skill base that derive from acquiring a general business degree versus an industry-specific degree, such as textiles and apparel. Textile and apparel curricula typically focus on building product knowledge, perhaps at the expense of the managerial knowledge that companies look for when hiring for or promoting individuals to upper-level positions. Participants in this study indicated an overall satisfaction with what their degree programs provided in terms of the ability to do the job at hand. However, a comprehensive analysis of career development within the textiles and apparel industries that would compare job type with degree type (i.e., a general business degree vs. a textiles and apparel degree) is needed, as this would help to map out the long-term benefits and drawbacks of one degree over another.

When asked whether gender was an advantage or disadvantage to achieving higher level positions, participants believed that being female was a disadvantage. This finding supports previous non industry-specific research on the role of gender and upward professional mobility (e.g., Moreau, Osgood, & Halsall, 2007). But because some participants reported that they have been witnessing positive changes in their companies, and specifically more frequent promotions of women into higher level positions, gender as a factor in the textile and apparel workplace needs further investigation.

The qualitative nature of the study does not lend itself to making generalizations beyond the sample. However, supporting informal and formal means of networking between women, recognizing women as vital to the workforce, and valuing the contributions of female employees at all levels are recommendations for the textile and apparel industries that stem from the interpretive findings of the interviews. This study was limited by its focus on a single region of the country. Expansion of the study to include women working in other regions of the United States, such as the east and west coast fashion centers, as well as internationally, would provide depth to our overall understanding of career development in the textile and apparel industries.

The results of this study shed light on what it is like for recent female graduates in the early stages of their careers. Participants were happy with their degrees and what they gained by majoring in textiles and apparel. They felt well-prepared for their industry jobs and recognized that, with the exception of life experience, most of the knowledge that they rely on to perform their job responsibilities was learned in college. Higher education programs in textiles and apparel must continue to keep pace by providing students with the tools to succeed in this

dynamic workplace and with experiences that afford them a glimpse into the working world that they will soon be part of.

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