Identifying the Skills that Students Need to Succeed: Perspectives of US and Global Apparel Entrepreneurs and Small Business Owners

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Abstract
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Keywords
entrepreneurship, industry globalization, small business, undergraduate curricula

Disciplines
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Comments

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Identifying the Skills that Students Need to Succeed: Perspectives of US and Global Apparel Entrepreneurs and Small Business Owners

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To survive the dynamics of the global economy, many US firms have been forced to scale back and reduce their employee base. Those that have survived are generally more flexible and able to adapt primarily because they are smaller in scale (Cammett, 2006). Moreover, the globalization of the production process has necessitated a US industry workforce capable of working with suppliers in several different countries and often at different points along the supply chain (Gereffi, 2000). These suppliers tend to be small in scale, inasmuch as emerging economies often focus on the manufacture of apparel and textile products for large US companies (Scott, 2006). Such changes point to the need to understand the variety of ways that the small business is critical to the US apparel industry.

Textile and apparel graduates entering the workforce must understand the role that small business plays within the industry and overall economy. According to the US Small Business Administration (SBA), small sized firms represent 99.7% of all firms with employees, and account for 64% of all new jobs created in the US over the past fifteen years (SBA, 2009). In addition, recent data provided by the US Bureau of the Census reveal that 49% of textile and apparel related manufacturing firms (NAICS 313, 314, 315, and 316) are small in size, employing approximately 59% (around 350,000) of the total number of employees in this sector.

Given the high number of small-sized textile- and apparel-related businesses, and the considerable percentage of small firms in general within the US, it is likely that graduates from textile and apparel programs will go on to work for a small business or to partner with such firms in the global manufacturing process. Undergraduate curricula must therefore acknowledge the new, scaled back “face” of the industry by addressing its workforce needs. Moreover, because many students in textile and apparel programs aspire to eventually own their own businesses (Hodges & Karpova, 2009), developing the skills needed to create and maintain a successful enterprise must be an essential part of their undergraduate experience.

This study reports on findings derived from primary and secondary data collected on small business and entrepreneurship in five countries that play an important role within the global apparel industry supply chain: the US, India, South Africa, Russia, and Thailand. Secondary statistical data were compiled for each of the five countries, as were descriptions of the nature and definition of small business in the country, the role of small business within the country’s
industry, and the relationship between small business and government. Primary data were gathered via a total of thirty interviews conducted with industry and government leaders within the five countries. Questions focused on the interviewee’s perceptions of opportunities and challenges faced by small business as well as particular competencies needed to address them by graduates of apparel programs. Businesses were positioned at key points along the supply chain, including design, manufacturing, as well as small retailers. Interviews were transcribed and then analyzed by the researchers for patterns that emerged across the responses. Secondary data were used to supplement analysis of primary data to achieve a holistic interpretation of results.

Five skill areas were identified as important for successful apparel-related entrepreneurs and small businesses: relationship-building, niche identification, resourcefulness, community engagement, and global awareness. Relationship-building examines the significance of support networks. Niche identification explores the need for clearly defined operational goals and strategic objectives. Resourcefulness examines the ways that entrepreneurs and small businesses do more with less. Community engagement investigates the significance of the broader community for the entrepreneur and small business. Global awareness explores the ways small business and entrepreneurship can be enhanced through cultural diversity. It is recommended that entrepreneurship and small business-related curricula in textile and apparel programs focus on developing students’ skills in these particular areas. Moreover, based on the findings, students would likely benefit from curricula that integrate opportunities to examine entrepreneurship and small business specifically within the global industry context.

The industry requires professionals who are capable of addressing the unique challenges faced by entrepreneurs and small business from a global perspective. Findings point to the importance of providing students the opportunity to learn how to address industry-specific issues and problems that arise across cultures and to do so from a global perspective. Whether a textile and apparel graduate goes on to work for a small firm, start their own, or source from one abroad, an understanding of what makes entrepreneurship and small business important within a global context is critical for enhancing professional potential and building a successful industry career.

References: