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## Introduction

Sourcing has grown into a strategic function within the global business landscape, influencing outcomes through sustainability, digital innovation, and resilience. Rather than being solely about cost, sourcing now influences product development, risk management, and market reach.

Recognising its growing impact across the sector, Paul Lennen, host of The Sourcing Exchange, met with experienced sourcing industry executive Jacqui Gray to explore how sourcing is reshaping the future of fashion and retail. Their conversation examined the evolving demands of the sourcing function, drawn from Jacqui's career progression and hands-on experiences. This article summarises the main themes and observations from their exchange, highlighting how trends in the field are shaping the industry's trajectory.

## The Power of On-the-Ground Insight

In a fast-paced environment shaped by geopolitical risks, shifting consumer expectations, and digital transformation, Jacqui stands out for her ability to translate real-time sourcing experiences into compelling, first-hand narratives. As Paul noted in the interview, Jacqui's field-based content demystifies supply chain realities, offering direct observations on the complexities of global sourcing, from risk mitigation to scaling sustainable practices.

By articulating operational challenges and opportunities as they arise, her insights offer a transparent and immediate perspective on real-world sourcing issues. Jacqui's approach to content creation, grounded in direct observation and timely commentary, brings clarity to the often-complex realities of supply chain management and strategic sourcing.

Jacqui explained her process, which is driven by inspiration and a desire to capture moments as they happen. "When I'm inspired, I write," she stated, emphasising that her articles are often composed during sourcing trips to maintain their relevance and immediacy. This approach allows her to share unfiltered observations, whether it's a commentary on automation in factories or a "silly one in Bangladesh with an overloaded lorry". The feedback she receives is overwhelmingly positive, with industry professionals expressing a keen interest in her unique perspectives that go beyond sanitised corporate reports.

Jacqui's method of content creation is based on candid communication and immediacy. Her work reflects a strong appetite within the industry for firsthand perspectives that are both informative and rooted in practical experience. By translating complex sourcing situations into relatable stories, she sparks meaningful discussion and enhances understanding of the specific challenges and nuances involved in global sourcing.

## **A Non-Traditional Path into Sourcing**

Jacqui's career path into sourcing reflects the benefits of diverse experience and adaptability. With an academic background in human geography, she brought insights into culture, communication, and operational networks to the sourcing world. Rather than following a traditional route through fashion or business, Jacqui leveraged her understanding of global dynamics to navigate complex supply chains and new environments.

Her career began in retail before a pivotal opportunity arose in 2005 to move to Bangladesh and step into the world of sourcing through a role with Tesco. Jacqui noted that this transition required a significant degree of bravery. Relocating to a sourcing country such as Bangladesh involves more than a professional change; it demands a profound personal adjustment to a different culture and living environment. She shared an anecdote about a Dutch merchandiser colleague who successfully moved to Dhaka to work in a sourcing business, illustrating the entrepreneurial spirit and resilience needed to thrive in such a role.

The discussion highlighted how the pathway into sourcing has evolved. While it may once have been a more structured corporate trajectory, today it often requires a willingness to take risks and immerse oneself fully in the operational heart of the supply chain.

Jacqui's story underscores that skills developed outside the traditional fashion curriculum—such as cultural empathy, adaptability, and a genuine interest in human systems—are not merely advantageous but essential. For aspiring sourcing professionals, the key takeaway is that passion and the willingness to embrace unfamiliar situations can be more critical than a conventional CV. This non-linear career progression is a powerful reminder that expertise is built through experience, and the most valuable lessons are often learnt far from a corporate head office.

## The Modern Sourcing Executive: Conductor of a Complex Orchestra

The role of a sourcing executive, as described by Jacqui, involves coordinating across designers, buyers, merchandisers, and factory partners to ensure smooth operations throughout the supply chain.

Beyond daily operational responsibilities, sourcing executives coordinate across functions, maintain supplier relationships, and address the challenges of working within a global supply chain. Their role is defined by the ability to adapt, solve complex problems, and navigate varied environments—ensuring product delivery while managing expectations throughout the organisation and with external partners.

Jacqui elaborated on this, emphasising that passion, energy, and highly developed soft skills are paramount. Sourcing is not a profession for the faint-hearted; it involves navigating unusual situations and solving complex problems on a daily basis. The ability to remain open to learning and to adapt to unforeseen challenges is what separates successful sourcing leaders from the rest.

A "typical day" in sourcing is anything but typical, varying dramatically depending on location and objective. Jacqui contrasted the experience of working in Bangladesh with that in China. In Bangladesh, a day might involve intensive factory visits focused on operational challenges, managing production timelines, and addressing issues on the ground. These visits can be operationally dense but also filled with the excitement of uncovering new opportunities and building relationships. Conversely, a day in a Chinese sourcing office is often more focused on product development. It involves preparing samples, hosting buyers and designers, and engaging in strategic discussions around margin optimisation and material innovation.

This duality illustrates the broad skill set required. A sourcing executive must be as comfortable discussing cost engineering on a factory floor as they are presenting a new collection to a team of designers. They must be both operationally rigorous and creatively attuned. The role demands an individual who can seamlessly switch between macro-level strategy and micro-level execution, all whilst managing relationships across cultural and linguistic divides. It is this ability to conduct the entire supply chain orchestra that defines the modern sourcing executive.

## Navigating a Sector in Flux: Strategic Imperatives

The global fashion sector is experiencing considerable challenges, influenced by changes in geopolitics, rising tariffs, and increasing expectations for sustainability and transparency. Jacqui explained that this environment demands agility and adaptability in sourcing approaches. She described how the ability to respond effectively to unexpected events while maintaining supply continuity is now crucial. Companies must balance cost management with the integration of ESG goals, adapting quickly to new conditions and taking a thoughtful approach to building resilient sourcing strategies.

To summarise, strategic sourcing agility—rooted in real-time data, advanced analytics, and cross-functional collaboration—is fundamental to navigating disruption and unlocking competitive advantage in fashion's global marketplace.

Jacqui provided a nuanced view of how suppliers are responding to this pressure. She identified two primary models emerging. The first is the "forward-facing" supplier who is actively expanding their geographic footprint to mitigate risk and capture new opportunities. This often involves a hub-and-spoke model, where a primary manufacturing base (such as China) supports newer, smaller operations in other countries. Egypt, for example, has recently seen an increase in sourcing activity as companies seek alternatives.

The second type of supplier is one that chooses to focus on operational excellence. Rather than expanding offshore, these companies are investing heavily in automation and efficiency improvements within their existing facilities. This strategy is a bet on technology as a means to remain competitive, addressing rising labour costs and external pressures through enhanced productivity.

Underlying these strategic shifts is a continual pressure on pricing. Jacqui noted that fabric prices and Cut, Make, and Trim (CMT) costs are under intense scrutiny as retailers and brands strive to manage final product prices without compromising on quality. This environment calls for a more sophisticated approach to sourcing, where strategic decisions about geography, technology, and supplier partnerships are directly tied to financial performance and risk management. Navigating this complex landscape is no longer merely an operational capability; it is a core strategic imperative for any fashion business seeking to thrive in the years ahead.

## The Strategic Role of Fabric in Retail

This part of the discussion opened with Paul's observation that fabric remains an underappreciated lever in retail and brand strategy, despite its substantial impact on cost structure and sustainability. Paul pointed out that, in his view, most retailers and brands do not have a focused fabric game plan—even though fabric often represents 50–60% of total product costs and is central to carbon emissions and overall quality.

Jacqui responded that the approach to fabric depends greatly on a company's business model and product strategy. For businesses centred on fast-turn, fashion-forward assortments, decisions about fabric tend to follow choices on product design, colour, and sustainability attributes. In Jacqui's experience, the main focus is delivering the right product to market, with fabric serving as a tool rather than the starting point. She noted that this means working with a broad mix of materials across collections, rather than prioritising a single fabric platform.

However, she also highlighted examples where fabric plays a foundational role. Jacqui described a case involving a retailer specialising in cashmere, where the process begins with sourcing the raw fibre in bulk—integrating fabric into the brand's core product identity. This approach, she indicated, is typically seen in businesses with a core product focus and sufficient volume to leverage their buying power at the fibre or yarn stage.

Throughout the exchange, both Paul and Jacqui illustrated how the role of fabric within a company is closely linked to the breadth of its assortment and its sourcing capabilities. While some models allow fabric to shape the direction of product strategy, in many others, material selection remains a reactive process—an opportunity that, as Paul suggested, is far from being fully realised across much of the sector.

To conclude, fabric serves as a central consideration in retail sourcing, influencing everything from product quality to market differentiation. This highlights a significant opportunity for businesses to unlock new value. By treating fabric sourcing as a strategic function rather than a purely transactional one, companies can secure a competitive edge. This involves building deeper partnerships with mills, investing in material innovation, and integrating fabric strategy into the earliest stages of the design process. For executives, this shift in perspective can lead to improved margins, enhanced product quality, and a more compelling sustainability narrative—transforming a simple raw material into a powerful strategic asset.

## Conclusion: Key Takeaways for Sourcing Leaders

The discussion highlighted how innovation, sustainability, and adaptability are shaping the sourcing landscape amid ongoing business transformation. Jacqui and Paul's conversation emphasised the importance of real-time insights, cross-functional collaboration, and the strategic application of digital tools to manage risk and create value. They also discussed how strong supplier relationships and the integration of ESG commitments are enabling organisations to respond proactively to industry challenges. Overall, the exchange underscored that effective sourcing today is defined by agility, clarity of purpose, and a focus on delivering both operational excellence and responsible growth.

Firstly, authentic, on-the-ground experience offers practical visibility into the complexities and realities of the supply chain. The discussion also illustrated that careers in sourcing often develop from varied backgrounds, with sometimes non-traditional fields equipping professionals with skills in systems thinking and cultural empathy. Adaptability, resilience, and an openness to new experiences emerged as common themes shaping successful approaches within the industry.

The discussion between Paul and Jacqui underscored that success in sourcing relies on balancing operational discipline, creativity, and strong supplier relationships. Navigating change requires agility—whether by reassessing sourcing locations, leveraging technology, or collaborating closely with partners. Emphasising core materials like fabric as strategic assets, rather than commodities, can drive both innovation and long-term value in a competitive industry.

Jacqui's insights highlight that sourcing is fundamentally about relationships, adaptability, and collaboration across diverse cultures and environments. The discussion with Paul showcased how understanding operational realities, communicating transparently, and embracing new perspectives can create meaningful value and foster industry-wide progress.