



# The New Operating Model for Fashion Sourcing

**Paul Lennen** and **Anne-Laure Descours** discuss why the future of fashion will depend increasingly on stronger sourcing models, deeper supplier partnerships, and better operating discipline



## **A conversation about how sourcing is changing**

In this episode of the Sourcing Exchange, Paul Lennen speaks with Anne-Laure Descours about the way sourcing is evolving across fashion. Drawing on her experience in sourcing leadership and manufacturing, Anne-Laure reflects on how the function has changed over time, the pressures now shaping it, and the capabilities that appear to be becoming more important.

Several themes run through the discussion. Sourcing is no longer described simply as an execution function. Supplier relationships are treated as a source of resilience, not just capacity. Planning, especially demand planning, is presented as a much more significant lever than it has often been regarded in the past. Across the conversation, there is also a consistent emphasis on materials, upstream visibility, and the importance of staying close to manufacturing knowledge.

Rather than offering a fixed model, the interview provides a perspective on the structural shifts that are reshaping sourcing and on the operating choices that seem to matter more than they once did.

## **Sourcing has become far more central to performance**

One of the clearest points in the interview is the extent to which sourcing now sits closer to the centre of business performance. Anne-Laure contrasts the role as it was often understood in the past with the role it plays today. What had once been treated more narrowly, and in some organisations almost as a commodity function, is now bound up with resilience, speed, compliance, visibility, and control.

Part of that shift is linked to the structure of the fashion industry itself. Most brands do not manufacture at scale. They design, market, and sell product, while the physical act of making it depends on a network of external manufacturers, processors, material specialists, and logistics providers. As the conversation makes clear, that reliance on external manufacturing places much greater weight on the quality of sourcing than many organisations previously recognised.

Anne-Laure also points to the way disruption has changed internal perceptions. In her account, pandemic-era shocks exposed how much of the process from product to shelf depends on deep operational understanding, and how much of that understanding had often remained too distant from the centre of decision-making.

The result is a broader definition of the role. The discussion touches on compliance, data, orchestration, capacity, material planning, and supplier development as areas that now sit much more squarely within the sourcing agenda.

## **The supplier model is changing as well**

Another strong theme in the discussion is the shift away from transactional sourcing models. Anne-Laure speaks at length about supplier partnerships and the limitations of treating suppliers as interchangeable.

One part of the conversation looks back at older purchasing models that prioritised price above all else. Her critique of that approach is direct. It may have appeared efficient, but it often prioritised headline cost over product quality, capability, and longer-term performance. That logic appears far less durable in today's environment, where onboarding a new supplier involves significantly more complexity than it once did.

This part of the interview also highlights the degree to which supplier investment depends on visibility. Where brands can provide clearer direction over time, suppliers are in a stronger position to invest in machinery, upstream capability, and their own operating models. That in turn shapes resilience, agility, and execution quality.

What comes through clearly is that the supplier relationship is no longer framed simply as a procurement issue. It is treated more as a question of ecosystem design.

## **Much of the value sits upstream**

A recurring point in the conversation is that the industry still pays too little attention to what happens beyond tier one. Anne-Laure returns several times to the role of mills, fabrics, trims, processors, and other upstream actors in shaping cost, lead time, and product quality.

This becomes especially important in the discussion of materials. Rather than treating final assembly as the dominant sourcing question, Anne-Laure puts much greater emphasis on fabric and material strategy. The point is a practical one. In many cases, materials account for the majority of product cost and a large share of lead time. That means sourcing decisions focused only on final assembly can miss where much of the real value, and many of the real constraints, actually sit.

The interview also explores what deeper upstream visibility can make possible. Anne-Laure describes a model in which closer engagement with tier two and tier three enables better planning, stronger traceability, and more room for suppliers to contribute operational and technical ideas. In that model, suppliers are not only responding to demand. They are also helping shape how the wider ecosystem performs.

This section of the discussion adds depth to the broader argument about sourcing becoming more strategic. It is not simply that the function has become more important. It is that the relevant field of attention has widened considerably.

## **Manufacturing knowledge still matters**

One of the more distinctive features of the interview is the emphasis placed on manufacturing knowledge itself. Anne-Laure repeatedly returns to the idea that better sourcing depends on understanding how the product is actually made, how lead times are created, where materials come from, and how trade-offs are managed inside the production system.

That point is framed both operationally and geographically. Operationally, the argument is that many sourcing decisions now require a much deeper grasp of the production base than before. Geographically, Anne-Laure speaks strongly about the concentration of expertise across manufacturing hubs in Asia, including sourcing know-how, systems capability, sustainability data, and factory operations.

This is not presented as a generic East versus West argument. It is more a reflection on where practical knowledge sits and how far some brand organisations have drifted from it. The discussion raises concerns about how little time some teams now spend in factories and how manufacturing literacy may have weakened in parts of the industry where production moved offshore long ago.

Another thread here is talent. Anne-Laure describes the need for teams that bring together commercial judgement, technical manufacturing understanding, supplier-side knowledge, and data capability. As the sourcing agenda expands, those capabilities appear less separable than they may once have done.

## AI enters the conversation through planning

When the interview turns to AI, the discussion remains grounded. Rather than focusing on broad narratives around transformation, Anne-Laure identifies demand planning as one of the clearest immediate use cases.

Forecast accuracy is described as foundational to sourcing. The conversation links it directly to supplier capacity, production stability, and waste reduction. A weak forecast introduces volatility into the system. It creates peaks and troughs for suppliers, makes planning more reactive, and increases the risk of excess production. A better forecast produces a more stable basis for sourcing and manufacturing decisions.

This line of argument becomes more concrete when the discussion turns to size-level demand, production alignment, and the ability to produce closer to what is actually needed. The relationship between forecasting and commercial performance is also made explicit, with Anne-Laure pointing to examples where stronger planning capability has had meaningful business impact.

From there, the discussion moves naturally into materials. Better demand visibility makes earlier fabric positioning more realistic, particularly where a smaller number of fabrics accounts for a large share of repeat volume. In that sense, planning is presented not only as a forecasting function, but as something that shapes how the whole production model works.

What emerges is a practical view of AI. Its value is not treated as abstract. It appears most compelling where it improves the quality of operational decision-making.

## Agility depends on more than speed

Agility is another theme that runs through the discussion, though not in the usual way. Rather than treating it simply as a matter of reacting quickly, Anne-Laure connects it to materials, system design, and manufacturing understanding.

This becomes especially clear in the part of the conversation that looks at sourcing geography. She questions the assumption that moving to a new country automatically creates agility, particularly when the material base remains far away. The logic is straightforward. If much of the cost sits in materials, and if lead time is heavily influenced by where those materials come from, then a narrow focus on assembly location can miss the larger picture

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## **Sustainability is discussed through an operational lens**

The sustainability discussion is striking for how practical it remains. Anne-Laure does not dismiss the burden of regulation or reporting. At the same time, she argues that the conversation becomes more productive when sustainability is framed less as punishment and more as a source of business value.

Several examples are used to support that view. Mapping the supply chain creates better visibility. Data collection improves understanding of the business. Energy investments can lower cost. More disciplined planning can reduce waste. Across the discussion, sustainability is treated less as a standalone agenda and more as something that intersects directly with sourcing, materials, operations, and competitiveness.

Ownership is also an important part of this section. Anne-Laure speaks about sustainability as gaining more traction when it sits closer to sourcing and operations, partly because these functions are closest to the daily realities of suppliers, materials, planning, and execution. That does not resolve every tension around the issue, but it does shape how the conversation is framed. The emphasis throughout is less on abstract positioning and more on capability building.

## **Regulation changes the framing of the work**

The discussion of regulation develops this point further. Anne-Laure acknowledges the pushback that many companies feel, particularly in Europe, but the more interesting part of her argument concerns framing.

The distinction she draws is between regulation understood mainly as restriction and regulation understood as a prompt to build better internal capability. In the latter case, the work of traceability, data collection, and supply chain mapping becomes more than a compliance burden. It also contributes to a better understanding of how the business functions.

This does not remove the complexity of regulation, and the conversation does not pretend otherwise. What it does suggest is that the way the issue is interpreted can materially shape how organisations respond to it.

## **A sourcing model under pressure and in transition**

Taken together, the discussion offers a coherent picture of a function under pressure, but also in transition. The interview does not claim that the industry is moving uniformly in one direction, nor does it present Anne-Laure's perspective as a universal model. What it does provide is a clear account of the issues she sees as becoming harder to ignore.

Supplier depth, upstream visibility, planning discipline, material strategy, and manufacturing knowledge all feature prominently. So does the sense that sourcing now touches a much broader range of outcomes than it once did. Cost remains part of the picture, but it no longer dominates it in the same way.

What stands out most across the interview is the extent to which sourcing is described not as a support activity, but as a shaping force within the business. Whether the issue is resilience, agility, sustainability, or the practical use of AI, the discussion keeps returning to sourcing as one of the places where these pressures meet.

That, more than any single conclusion, may be the strongest thread running through the conversation.