

Essential Skills Needed In The African Fashion Industry In 2022

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The Council for International African Fashion Education (CIAFE) is a non-profit organisation dedicated to improving the standards of Fashion Education in Africa, with the aim to close the knowledge and skills gap, create opportunities for future talent and contribute to economic growth. Our aim is also to support decolonising the fashion curriculum within European and North American institutions.

CIAFE is committed to uniting the fashion industry and academia. Through ensuring educators stay on top of the changing skills due to technological advancements, macro-environmental changes, and cultural influences for the purpose that the curriculum meets industry standards.

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Introduction

The fashion industry is currently witnessing the fourth industrial revolution, which has evolved in leaps and bounds. This is primarily due to COVID-19, sustainability concerns, and new labour practises, in particular, remote and hybrid work. Professionals in the industry have had to re-evaluate the skills needed to succeed.

Although these skills are largely related to specific roles, certain core skills will generally benefit fashion professionals in any position. These skills will also help fashion professionals stand out to employers in the industry.

This report seeks to highlight these core skills to aid stakeholders in navigating their way through the fashion industry in 2022.

Digital Skills

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the acceleration of digitalisation across all sectors has widened the gap of in-demand skills (IFC, 2021). Digital skills that were traditionally sectioned to a few industries are now expected from the majority of players across all industries, including fashion. For example, in fashion, design sketches that have historically been hand-drawn on paper are now being done digitally using Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator software.

Digital skills are the ability to access and handle information through digital devices, communication applications, and networks (UNESCO, 2018). If anything, the need for digital skills in fashion has grown more urgent. Thankfully, digital skills can be learnt informally with access to the internet and the availability of numerous online resources such as YouTube.

Acquiring digital skills is the surest way to gain a competitive edge and stay ahead for professionals looking to progress in the fashion industry. Brands are already creating digital garments, using virtual and augmented reality to improve shopping experiences, and organising virtual fashion shows. Here are some required digital skills that would be advantageous to professionals in the fashion industry.

- **Basic Technical and Software Skills:** A vast majority of current businesses have transitioned to digital operations. As a result, learning the fundamental operational skills for the most-used work software is a significant advantage. The improvement of expertise in using these apps falls under strategic digital skills. Some of the most common programs usually listed in job advertisements include Microsoft Office, Adobe software, Google Workspace, Slack, etc. Another essential online skill is video conferencing, which is increasingly important as more people work from home. This requires familiarity with video conferencing software such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google Meet, and Skype.
- **Digital Marketing Skills:** For most communication and marketing roles in fashion, acquiring digital marketing skills is necessary. Skills such as search engine optimisation (SEO), content marketing, and e-commerce marketing are commonly used within marketing initiatives. They are used to make the highest revenue possible by promoting products to a big audience. As a result, organisations frequently seek expertise from fashion professionals who can use these tools. Hence, when seeking job opportunities, digital marketing skills would make an individual in the industry one of the most attractive candidates in a pool of prospective employees.

- **Social Media Management Skills:** Social media also plays a crucial part in the current digital age. As a result, knowing how to use social media for professional purposes is a must-have skill. Understanding the dynamic relationship between businesses, influencers, and consumers is what social media management is all about. It goes beyond sending a tweet, an Instagram post, a TikTok video, or a Facebook status update. Professionals who recognise the influence of social media and its potential to maximise business reach and community engagement will seek to acquire skills in this area to stay ahead of the curve in the fashion industry.

Administrative Skills

Administrative skills assist industry professionals in completing activities linked to business management. These skills are vital because they ensure that business procedures work smoothly. Every efficient organisation seeking to succeed in its core mission tends to employ and work with professionals with solid administrative skills. There are several skills that anyone looking to work in the fashion industry should acquire. Such as:

- **Communication:** This is an essential skill to have when performing administrative duties. It is vital to effectively convey processes and information to employers and colleagues in formal and informal settings. It is also crucial to reply clearly to their questions and requests. Communication styles vary but include spoken, nonverbal, written, and visual techniques.
- **Organisation:** The ability to organise digitally and physically are also required from professionals to balance multiple responsibilities. This involves managing numerous activities and operations in a fast-paced setting such as the fashion industry.
- **Customer Service:** Strong customer service abilities, such as active listening, setting expectations, and communicating; are practical for industry professionals. This skill will allow them to carry out specific tasks such as answering inquiries or executing duties.
- **Responsibility:** Proper implementation of administrative duties are critical to a smooth operation of a corporation. As a result, fashion professionals with a good sense of responsibility to execute work on schedule and in a high-quality manner with little supervision are critical and in demand.
- **Time Management:** There are various responsibilities in the fashion business, making time management an important skill. This entails keeping a schedule, allocating time to finish tasks, and setting appropriate timetable expectations.
- **Multi-Tasking:** When working for a fashion brand, managing many responsibilities at the same time, may be required. It's not uncommon to respond to emails, answer phone calls, handle in-person inquiries, and fulfil project requirements on time. Combining the skills of organisation and time management provides professionals with the capacity to multi-task and allows them to manage numerous obligations at once.

- **Teamwork:** Strong teamwork abilities are advantageous when working on administrative projects, building new processes, communicating and implementing new procedures, or delegating jobs. Industry experts must understand that being a good teammate also entails demonstrating empathy, humility, and being an effective communicator to ensure the success of the fashion business.

Communication Skills

Communication skills are vital in the fashion industry. As a fashion professional, a lot of time is spent communicating ideas to employees, potential investors and the target market. Good communication skills are a must: as a potential employee seeking a job or an existing employee looking for a promotion.

Communication, or the transfer of information, can be vocal, in writing (using printed or digital media such as books, magazines, websites, emails or social media), visual (using logos, maps, charts or graphs) or non-verbal (using body language, gestures, tone and pitch of voice). In practice, it is often a mix of several of these. However, verbal communication skills are ranked first among a professional's must-have skills and qualities.

To communicate effectively, fashion industry players need to maintain good eye contact, demonstrate an assorted vocabulary, and tailor their language to their audience. They must also listen effectively, present their ideas appropriately, communicate clearly and concisely, and work well in a group.

Many of these are essential skills that employers seek in fashion businesses. Professionals must accompany these practical communication skills with confidence as well. Sound knowledge of the fashion industry will aid in confident communication.

Importance of Communication in the Fashion Industry

Communication is essential in every field and industry. The following few categories can understand the role of communication in the fashion industry:

- **Presentation Skills:** Depending on the industry role, experienced and non-experienced players may be required to present their portfolio to the press, buyers, potential investors and target market. Therefore, it is pertinent that they can sell their skills, talent and potential. Communicating confidently during presentations and delivering a meaningful presentation is an excellent way to attract the right people to the fashion business.
- **Networking:** The entire fashion industry revolves around a process of networking. Networking is essential in associating with the right people, building contacts, and connecting with customers or clients. Essentially, creating a good network within and outside of the fashion industry requires good communication skills.

- **Brand Storytelling:** In recent years, Instagram has been one of the most critical virtual communication tools used globally and has become a powerful tool for fashion brands. It has also been beneficial for the African fashion industry, as it has granted a lot of businesses international exposure and customers. Professionals must know how to communicate by telling a solid brand story with quality visuals and adequate information about the brand.

Effective Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication Techniques and Tips

Here are some tips and techniques to consider when communicating verbally and non-verbally.

Verbal Communication

- Individuals across all levels in the industry should typically avoid filler words. Professionals, entrepreneurs, and students that use filler words can make it difficult for their audience to understand what they are saying. A better option to explore would be to collect your thoughts, pause and take a breath. Pausing sounds better than saying “um” or “like.”
- Emphasising important information helps professionals be clear and concise. Emphasising is an excellent way to ensure that the audience will remember the information passed across even after the presentation has ended.

Non-verbal Communication

- Posture is one of the most important parts of communicating confidently; hence, bad posture should be avoided. Bad posture can be taken as a sign of timidity or no interest.
- Making eye contact when speaking helps to have a better conversation and portrays confidence.

In summary, communication skills are instrumental to be able to thrive in the fashion industry. The ability to speak, listen and write with clarity is critical for success in the fashion industry.

Technological Skills

The sewing machine was invented in 1790 by Thomas Saint. Before its invention, garments were manufactured by hand stitching (Jonella, 2019). The creation of the sewing machine led to the rise of new industries, mainly ready-to-wear clothes. Consequently, individuals and society benefited in many ways from this development. As the technology evolved, the steps in this cut-and-sew process and how consumers purchase fashion products have become increasingly automated and have led to industry efficiency.

Before the first industrial revolution, making clothes was much more laborious, costly, and time-consuming. Unfortunately, many fashion brands in Africa are still caught in this era that no longer exists in the international fashion community. The African fashion industry needs to adopt technology or risk being at the infant stage of business, in order to compete internationally. Here are some technologies and technological skills people can adopt in the African fashion industry in 2022.

Social Media

Before social media platforms, websites and blogs were the epitome of an active online presence for brands. TikTok and Instagram are currently two of the most powerful social media tools for all businesses, including fashion businesses. Millennials and Gen-Z crave comfort, and many of them are increasingly shopping for their favourite brands via the platforms.

It can be somewhat tedious being constantly active, and many independent designers might find this kind of technology stressful. This can be outsourced to a social media expert to handle content creation, communicate with existing and potential customers, take orders, plan live feeds, and keep the audience engaged to the business page. Social media platforms can also lead to sponsored partnerships with other brands, reach new audiences, and promote a brand internationally. The possibilities are endless, and this is why social media must be fully utilised.

Robotic Process Automation and AI

Robotics automation and new technologies that aim to perform human-like tasks are already changing how fashion companies operate. Automation is undoubtedly here to stay, as nearly 50% of digitally mature companies now claim to have a defined AI strategy in place (Retail Insider, 2020).

A robot sewing machine known as "Sewbot" was invented in 2012. The Sewbot handles fabric cutting, sewing and ensures its transformation into a finished product (Hossain, 2021).

Sewbots can currently only produce T-shirts, and it takes roughly four minutes to create. Its creators have mentioned that Sewbots would continue to evolve until they can make other clothing like dresses, skirts, trousers. It's important to note that this is not to replace humans within the garment industry. Humans are still responsible for developing new technologies and innovations and managing and maintaining them. This opens up new, innovative employment opportunities.

Virtual Reality

E-commerce and mobile commerce were the first to revolutionise the fashion industry, and now, we are looking at the new wave of transformation: virtual reality.

The rise of virtual reality platforms allows brands to merge the online and physical world of retail. For instance, customers can now use try-on avatars or apps like DressingRoom to try outfits customised to their measurements before buying them.

Virtual reality platforms can also be used for fashion shows. For example, in 2020 Balenciaga staged its dystopian autumn/winter 2021 collection as a virtual reality runway show presented through Oculus glasses sent to 330 guests worldwide. After the show, Balenciaga released the video game *Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow*. The African fashion industry can leverage this technology to provide customers with a more personalised experience.

Metaverse

Metaverse, also known as the metadata warehouse or alternative digital space, is the next mega-phase of the web. It is a combination of AR (Augmented Reality) and VR (Virtual Reality) in the real world (Reuters, 2021). The concept of the Metaverse is not new, with reference being made as early as 1992. However, it has attracted recent attention thanks to Facebook (now named Meta) and fashion companies like Nike. According to the Wall Street Journal, people in the Metaverse will live in immersive, shared virtual environments in a vast online universe.

In the Metaverse, industry players can try out products in stores or attend concerts using avatars, just as they would physically. The Metaverse allows brands to bring data and experiences into the real world, essentially placing them in our environment. The Metaverse is, at its core, a parallel universe in which we can work, relate and communicate (Marr, 2021). The Metaverse will completely change the internet as it is known today.

Blockchain

Blockchain is a decentralised, distributed ledger that stores transactions sequentially. In a nutshell, it is a technical tool that makes it possible for fashion companies to store and transmit information throughout their entire supply chain – from producers to distributors, in complete transparency and a secure manner.

This technology is often translated into a QR code and assigned to each garment. The code can trace the entire history of a garment, and customers will know how their garments are manufactured, the materials used, and the unit cost (Tudor, 2021).

Blockchain is vital for the fashion industry because it will help brands promote and verify an ethical manufacturing process from start to finish and prove their products' authenticity and sustainability.

In other words, blockchain technology can help guarantee supply chain transparency, secure intellectual property, and improve the efficiency of data sharing.

NFTs

NFTs are Non-Fungible Tokens; non-fungible refers to one of a kind, unique digital asset used to prove digital ownership. Previously, digital assets were somewhat easy to steal due to lack of proper attribution, and this resulted in creators of such works being cheated out of their royalties. However, NFTs are an excellent way to mark digital assets. For example, when a piece of music, digital artwork or video has been created, it can be 'minted' as an NFT to prove ownership over it, as each NFT is distinct and traceable (Momint, 2021). NFTs are also an exceptional way to control the supply of digital content. The reason is that, even if others can see a particular NFT, only one person can own it.

They can be thought of as the digital equivalent of the kind of receipt that would be received after a physical item has been purchased. As a fashion designer, turning design sketches into an NFT is a way of adding a digital signature that can never be forged or removed.

NFTs were created to tokenise and digitalise any item so that it cannot be replicated or substituted. It becomes a unique item with the aid of blockchain technology. Many of the NFT fashion 'drops' that have done well are from digitally native fashion houses that don't have physical storefronts or household name recognition. The African fashion industry would benefit greatly from this technology as it grants them international exposure and limits imitation of their designs by international competition.

Paul Tudor Jones' attitude towards the changing digital landscape can be applied in this context: "You adapt, evolve, compete or die". This relates to everything in life and it is especially important to evolve in the business world. The African fashion industry must grasp the existing and new technologies or it risks being a competitive industry.

Research Skills

Though there are accessible resources for people to creatively achieve their goals, finding accessible resources can pose a challenge for many. Hence, research is a crucial element. Researching is practical to all fashion industry stakeholders, not just in business but also in organisations or as a student. When it comes to the fashion market, changes occur constantly, so staying on top of what is happening domestically and internationally is crucial to the business's success. Professionals must remain current and relevant. In this regard, business owners, professionals, employees and entrepreneurs need business research to make confident and informed decisions to guide the development and evolution of their fashion companies.

As a player in this industry, research should be conducted to achieve some or all of the following goals:

- Learn how the brand or a competitor's brand resonates with customers.
- Identify the factors that influence consumer attitudes and buying decisions.
- Find new markets, customer segments, and growth opportunities.
- Discover how to evolve the brand as a result of existing customers.

This type of research is also essential because it helps fashion corporations compare the secondary resources with their primary sources counterparts and draw meaningful information from the exercise. Research from secondary sources may be conducted from:

- Fashion trade publications
- Market research databases
- Statistics from the government sites
- You can browse your competition's website and other digital properties like apps, mobile sites, ads, etc.

Other websites that house secondary information for the fashion industry are:

- The Business Of Fashion
- Global Apparel Market - Statistics & Facts
- Market Research Reports & Industry Analysis
- NPD Fashion Trend Tracker
- Mintel
- Worth Global Style Network
- Women's Wear Daily
- Vogue Business
- Heuristics.

Financial Acumen

Acquiring financial acumen is essential because finances significantly impact the way budgets and resources are allocated for any business (Bennett, 2021). Professionals in management positions need to understand the causes and effects of every financial decision. For example, a business owner looking to hire labourers for their business will decide based on the available financial resources. When employees are not trained in financial acuity, poor business decisions are made. For a company to be successful, managerial staff must understand what makes money for the company, how it is made, and effectively communicate this to other employees. Fortunately, financial acumen is a skill that can be learned (ICAEW, 2007).

Furthermore, when evaluating alternative investment and budgeting scenarios before making a financial decision, professionals must be aware of many options that suit the liquidity available. For instance, a fashion brand thinking of expanding in a particular area would have to consider partnerships with existing retail stores or rent versus buying a retail store. In the process of making this decision, an opportunity cost is taken. Ultimately, getting to know the language of the finance department is vital to work more effectively and efficiently, as this is the language of business.

Legal Acumen

Legal acumen is a core area of focus when working in fashion. It denotes having an understanding of the law, which can be a powerful skill for both the business and the employee. Knowledge of labour rights and practices will prevent fashion employers and employees from potential workplace issues and violations. This can span across any kind of role in the industry and applies to all experience levels, whether students, graduates or established professionals. With this in mind, it is clear to see how the law will impact different aspects of fashion employment. Some important things for industry players to consider are:

- **Working hours:** This is an area that impacts the employee side of the labour market. The amount of time spent working will vary due to shifting workloads and roles, which may require employees to work outside of agreed hours. This is an inevitable reality of most jobs to ensure tasks are completed well and deadlines are met. While it may not be uncommon, there needs to be an overall balance. Employees that find themselves consistently working well over agreed hours without compensation should take action to improve the situation.
- **Compensation:** Unpaid internships have historically been notorious in the fashion industry and have sparked uproar from many. Fashion businesses have generally put a stop to such practices and internships should typically be, at least, subsidised in some way (i.e travel expenses) if not paid. Employees and interns need to factor in all of the benefits they are being offered before assuming the role.
- **Intellectual property:** Intellectual property (IP) law relates to the ownership of a piece of work. In a creative industry such as fashion that recognises originality, it is paramount that there is clarity around who owns an idea. There have been several cases whereby an employee's work (and in some cases even an applicant) has been utilised by a brand without crediting them. In these instances, the lack of recognition may simply be down to the intellectual property rights that have been agreed upon. It is commonplace for businesses to stipulate that the work employees produce while under their employment will become their property. While frustrating, this shouldn't necessarily be seen as a loss. However, employees need to be clear on the IP rights stated in their contracts from the beginning. This will help ensure that they are not breaking any laws or being taken advantage of.
- **Data protection rights:** Businesses are increasingly leveraging the benefits that data-informed decisions can yield. Fashion is no exception, and this is evident with the increased use of targeted marketing based on data analytics.

Even the basics such as data handling is crucial to get right. How a business manages information about its customers will vary depending on local laws. Establishing a data protection policy is a good idea for fashion brands, to not only ensure compliance with local laws but also reassure consumers that their personal information is protected.

The contract is at the core of all business arrangements. Hence employers and employees need to ensure that they take time to carefully draft and read the contract respectively because it may come down to compromising certain factors to get the best experience. As an employee, negotiation is also an important right that should be exercised to appropriately challenge some clauses. Ultimately, it is important to seek professional legal advice before entering an employment contract. However, it is important to note that contracts for more junior roles should not be exceptionally long or complex, which is another thing to look out for.

Legal knowledge is also key on the side of the business. Understanding what protocols should be in place with regards to a company's employees is only one side. How businesses interact with consumers is another. In conclusion, it is important to note that the law is extensive and ever-changing. Only a few considerations have been referenced here. Developing a base level understanding of the law and keeping up to date with developments will ensure employers and employees within the fashion industry comply and operate within their rights.

Crisis Management Skills

Preparation is vital for crisis management. All levels of professionals in the fashion industry should put in the work to build skills that will equip them to deal with any challenging predicaments and potential setbacks. Some of the most important skills to build are:

- **Awareness:** An ability to anticipate issues is crucial. Professionals, educators, and other players in the industry need to recognise a problem as early as possible to address it adequately. There are many ways to do this, but at its core, it relies on staying informed on current affairs and utilising analytical thinking. PESTLE analysis is an example of an excellent diagnostic framework popularly adopted by businesses to examine external influences that may impact them. The acronym breaks down the analysis of external factors into six categories: Political, Economic, Sociological, Technological, Legal and Environmental. This approach can be helpful when conducting an audit. The framework is only a guide, so all factors may not always be considered.

The main goal is to adopt a method of staying commercially aware and identifying risks that may affect the person or business in future.

- **Knowledge of Business Structure:** Identifying risks is only a precursor to being able to manage a crisis; attitude is key to being able to cope in the fashion industry. At times like this, it can feel natural to try to seek control over the situation but diverting attention to the structure will prove to be more beneficial. While the two may seem synonymous, control implies that a certain outcome is expected. Structure on the other hand prioritises order which is rooted in strong organisational skills. All of this can be incredibly overwhelming and require a lot of effort so putting in the work will help in alleviating the pressure.
- **Flexibility:** Threats and opportunities can be two sides of the same coin. However, one factor will be relevant for both: the presence of change. Responding to this change is the epitome of crisis management. Staying stagnant will be of no benefit; instead, industry stakeholders must be proactive and consider adapting. They will need to explore alternative paths, which will involve thinking about how their skills can apply to various roles. Additionally, it is crucial to cultivate transferable skills to better adapt to any position and environment.

True adaptability will require optimism and resilience, in this regard the well-being of all industry stakeholders in fashion should be a top priority when thinking about crisis management. It is expedient for these players to make sure they take the time to look after their health to have the strength needed to tackle the ever-changing industry.

Conclusion

Over the past year, the fashion industry has undergone rapid advancement, which has created a shift in the calibre of skills sought in top talent by fashion corporations when hiring. Although this report does not fully exhaust all the skills fashion corporations, professionals, entrepreneurs, and students need to thrive in the industry; the most important ones have been highlighted and discussed. The skills covered in this report include digital, administrative, communication, technical and research skills; financial and legal acumen, and crisis management.

For professionals and young people engaged with making an impact or entering the industry, these skills will help develop meaningful portfolios that make them attractive to any organisation. They would also be at the forefront of cutting edge developments in the industry. In a few years, digital skills will be necessary for any fashion role, from entry-level to executive positions. Stakeholders in developing countries, particularly Africa, will also have to reduce reliance on millennia-old technologies, adopt newer technologies to take precedence in fashion, and fully get on board with the latest digital technologies that welcome the African Fashion Decade.

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