

**TECH VS. FASHION**

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# The Importance of Getting Your Hands in the Clay

By Jane Singer

**A**S THE APPAREL INDUSTRY wrestles with how to add value to garments while managing cost and labor issues, the simple answer seems to be to turn to technology.

“Computers are fantastic - they speed up the entire process and make it more efficient, which is critical in an industry as fast paced as the fashion industry,” said Karyn Madison, a technical designer with 10 years industry experience with a leading U.S. fashion brand.

In a tech-driven era can computers replace skilled technicians? No, said Laurel Hoffman, an apparel industry veteran who has tirelessly campaigned for improved design room skills.

“Computers are a phenomenal tool but they are not a substitute for hands on training. Technicians need to first learn how to grade a pattern by hand, and then translate it onto the computer. The computer can’t do the work for you. It’s just a tool,” says Ms. Hoffman, who has taught design room methods at Drexel and at Philadelphia University, and is the author of *“Design Room Techniques,”* a text book for

design students.

Despite everything that new computer programs can do, you still haven’t eliminated the need for human beings in the technical process, said Ms. Madison. Many companies have tried to replace experienced technical staff with less experienced spec technicians and it hasn’t worked, she said.

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The critical skill that’s lacking in many technical designers is a ‘good eye.’ The critical skill that’s lacking in many technical designers is a ‘good eye.’ “There’s more to fit than just the

purely technical aspects, there’s also an aesthetic aspect. These are nuances, but they can make a tremendous difference in the overall fit and beauty of a garment,” said Ms. Madison.

“Companies desperately need people who understand how to draft and grade patterns that both go down a factory line successfully, and that produce beautiful clothing that fits. Pattern making is really about figuring things out. It’s basically engineering,” said Ms. Hoffman.

Production pattern makers need to know what to look out for throughout the entire technical process. They need to be able to solve problems and that requires a level of hands on experience - to create a well-fitting, aesthetically beautiful garment, says Ms. Madison.

According to Ms. Hoffman, the fashion industry is losing design skills and along with them it’s losing craftsmanship. “Designers need to understand industrial drafting and grading. They also need to know sample making - how the industry sews garments. And they need to be able to relate to the customer. Today many designers never see any of the clothing they have designed on any of their final customers.