

# Fitting the apparel industry for change



**Peter Cheng**

As a leading figure in the apparel industry, Peter Cheng had a clear view from the outset about the direction that his DBA thesis should take.

Drawing on his own experience and specialist knowledge, and backing that up with academic research, Cheng was keen to influence change by identifying the areas for reform and recommending the appropriate action.

“I want to see the industry take a step forward and move beyond the traditional business model,” says Cheng, the chairman of Hanbo Enterprises.

“It has to transform to be fit for future needs and cope with fast-approaching changes, while also offering a safe and secure work environment for everyone involved.”

The subject he settled on was vendor selection in the apparel supply chain.

He started from the premise that automation, machine

learning and other hi-tech advances will continue to drive rapid development, and sought to show that it is imperative for businesses to adapt quickly in the era of Industry 4.0.

“As someone involved in a more traditional type of manufacturing, I could see we don’t need to fear what is happening, but we do need to find ways to change ourselves,” Cheng says.

“We have to understand how to keep up with the evolution of IT and other technologies, which can provide new solutions to automate operations and overcome the risks of doing business,” he says.

These themes, along with the demand for e-commerce options and for greater transparency for stakeholders, informed his research.

In due course, they came together in a thesis which set out suggestions for more effective methods of vendor selection.

Cheng’s findings emphasised the importance of coordination and collaboration among supply



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chain partners to manage risk. He stressed the need to encourage attitudes and business values which are directed towards transparency and the development of trust.

“Being an experienced leader within the industry, I had a lot of ideas to share,” Cheng says. “However, I was accustomed to certain ways of producing results and knew the ‘academic style’ was not my strongest suit.”

As a result, he faced some initial difficulties. These related mainly to conducting surveys and persuading people to participate, both of which were

essential for getting a clear picture of the current situation and how the broader industry viewed the future.

“That wasn’t easy,” he says. “But overall, I found the technical part of writing the thesis was the most difficult thing for me.”

Persistence paid off, and Cheng is on the point of receiving a well-deserved doctorate.

He is proud that the research not only taught him a great deal, sometimes through trial and error, but will also have real-world applications for many companies in the years ahead.

“The most important thing for potential DBA candidates is to have a genuine interest in their proposed research topic, otherwise there is no reason to undertake the programme,” Cheng comments.

“Candidates need to be deeply and directly involved and passionate about the ideas. Without that, the results will be below par and will not benefit other people.”