

Bangladeshi Garment Employee Gold Standard™

Introduction

The objective of the Bangladeshi Garment Employee Gold Standard – Certificate (GEGS), is to set up and maintain a recognized factory good practise model that is driven by an employee development plan. Although we currently have a number of accreditations and good practise models to improve standards and ethical practises in factories this particular programme focuses on the actual factory worker involvement on an aggregate level.

The concept takes a bottom up approach where the focus on the employee will produce a change at the top. The programme in effect gives a voice to the worker, which is a force that is currently missing in the Bangladeshi business scenario. It endeavours to accommodate consistent communication to influence business decisions but also to empower workers. This is in effect a monitoring system that has a built in incentive for all participants namely the employees, factories, brands purchasing from these factories and also the garment manufacturing industry in Bangladesh as whole.

Why Bangladesh?

The Bangladeshi ready-made garment industry is the perfect scenario into which such an initiative can be implemented as its current climate allows for greatest change and impact. Firstly it is a democratic state, theoretically providing legal rights for their workers though lacking in practise. In the employment context workers are unable to act out their democratic rights due to a number of factors but one being the lack of social infrastructure, which we believe this programme would address. Secondly Bangladesh has a huge ready-made garment industry bringing in a massive amount of revenue to the country which means there is phenomenal potential for views and opinions of workers to be heard, should it carry some weight. Thirdly the recent Rana Plaza atrocities has emphasized the need for change in this country and whole world is not only waiting for this change but will most probably back it, should there be genuine and plausible efforts made.

The problem

The fashion industry has for a long time now been seen as a maze of disasters just waiting to happen. Though there is a huge array of auditors, policies, good practise measure and associations in place, the industry still seems to avoid accountability and continue to cause damage to our environment, abuse human beings and mislead customers. The root of the problem we believe is the inherent imbalance of power which in essence accommodate exploitation. Though Bangladesh is in theory a democracy, the barriers that prevent participation are overwhelming. Enabling participation we believe is the beginning of change and a consistent and forceful channel engaging a mass workforce would be an effective contribution.

The solution

The solution is already in use all across the world, in almost every market, business, organisation and product and is seen to be very effective. In simple terms it is feed-back, a two way communication, allowing two parties to exchange information, enabling both to be suppliers and customers. £Millions are spent on market research annually across the globe in understanding what customers want and delivering brands that produce

loyalty and endure. The use of this same mechanism adapted to the ready-made garment industry has the potential to have the same kind of impact. The Bangladeshi Garment Employee Gold Standard – Certificate (GEGS), is in effect this same mechanism adapted to give feedback from factory workers, gauge levels of awareness, empower workers, produce engagement and represent a work force. The benefit to the factory is a fully engaged and productive work force, able to take responsibility for their own work and produce high quality work.

The impetus for the programme

The Bangladeshi Garment Employee Gold Standard is underpinned by the consumer research conducted by the Ethicologist in 2014, interviewing 2000 adults of a nationally representative sample of the UK. 67% of the population say the responsibility to produce apparel in an ethical and sustainable manner lies with the brands and the manufacturers and businesses should be held accountable for any malpractice.

The initiative is also embedded in the belief that raising awareness and education encourages engagement and long lasting and sustained change. Gauging levels of awareness, providing missing information, encouraging and assisting personal development will only empower a workforce and bring about positive change that can benefit all.

Why our programme will succeed

The argument we pose for parties to consider is that the current context in which the Bangladeshi garment industry finds itself is the least beneficial for their workers, their factories, their customers (brands) and their industry as a whole. The workers are often un-schooled, poor migrants from the rural areas. They are vulnerable to exploitation due to their lack of information and also because a vast majority of them are women. The factories are often in poor condition, contributing to health and safety issues and have very little bargaining power to protect their worker's rights.

On the other hand, consumers want to buy products that are produced in compliance with international and local labour laws. One of their main concerns is the lack of trust in fashion brands that due diligence is carried out in their production of these goods. Brands also want reassurance of good practice and they want good quality products. Overall however, there is a lack of clarity, how can we easily recognize an ethically produced brand, where the workers receive their rightful share of the benefits.

We believe the Bangladeshi Garment Employee Gold Standard will not only provide these assurances but will also be a catalyst for change by incentivising good performance and providing exciting and attainable goals for workers, factories and the domestic garment industry as a whole.

Example

The Bangladeshi Garment Employee Gold Standard is to be rooted in a survey conducted amongst all the employees. It is slightly different to the usual employee survey as it will focus mostly on their awareness of sustainable practices, their rights as workers, the rights and expectations of their employers and how they use their knowledge to add value to their factories. There will be a very specific system of evaluation set up to show the levels of awareness, actual engagement and benefits brought to the wider industry. Just as an example one of the elements considered could be health and safety, and so questions covered might be -How many fire exits are there in the factory? How can they be accessed? What further actions could the factory do to eliminate fire hazards? What action have you personally taken to eliminate any fire hazards? Once the survey has been conducted, every employee will receive a grade for their participation, A Gold, Silver, Bronze

medal or a fail, which in turn will reflect on the relevant factory. The expectation is that a factory will be motivated to invest in their employees to bring about a favourable result for the whole factory. This element of competition we believe will drive performance and engagement, resulting in recognition and prestige which in turn will bring about more customers, customer loyalty and growth in business. The efficacy lies in the fact that it is a performance base system, which should produce a reliable result.

The impact

The implementation and development of this strategy we believe will bring about the following benefits:

- 1) Clarity in factory standards relating to labour laws/health and safety and skilled workers to all parties.
- 2) Interdependency amongst all parties to achieving high quality products in a people friendly and sustainable manner.
- 3) Brands using these factories will receive updates on how the factory is progressing and the contribution it is making to the wider ready-made garment industry. This can be fed back into the brand's corporate social responsibility programmes, which will inevitably enhance their sustainability policy. It can also be used in their advertising, to inform their customers.
- 4) Provide incentives for workers to educate themselves, this could be by forming forums and discussion groups, it could be by going to the right sources to find the information they need, or just simply having a more positive attitude to giving more back to the factory.
- 5) Provide incentives for factories to make information available, help their workers understand their contractual obligations which will throw more light on what workers are expected or not expected to do in their work.
- 6) Bring about continued dialog and discourse between all parties to allow for better cooperation.
- 7) Help change the reputation of the ready-made garment industry from being the cheapest labour force to a responsive and adaptable work force, where workers are learning about their value and using it to gain their share of the benefits.
- 8) The simplicity of the system will allow for transparency, uniting all parties to contribute and produce a tangible benefit ie the continued improvement of the factory grade on a six monthly basis.
- 9) Robust data to better understand the context of the ready-made garment industry work force, which can direct how and where investments can be made eg, skillsets that can be adapted to broaden the type garments made.
- 10) Provide a consistent and reliable channel of communication to introduce a bottom up approach to the current context.

Market place

The Ethicologist is primarily a market research company working within the ethical apparel industry. Our main product is a syndicated survey that we can sell to a number of fashion/apparel brands. This report provide an insight into the current fashion consumer market and consumer's awareness and engagement with the sustainability issue. We are also creating a product evaluation survey, which will give brands an insight into how their products are perceived by consumers. This will give them an idea of how receptive consumers are to their brand, how well their products compare with more familiar high street bands and also how much potential customers are willing to pay for their products. We believe the consumer research we do with fashion buyers will sway producers to buy into our employee Gold standard scheme.

The initial set up of the programme will require some outside investment, which will include questionnaire design and commitment to participate from at least 10 factories and a number of NGO's and other interested parties. However all factories, organisations and brands taking part in the scheme will pay a subsidised subscription fee for the results from the survey. The factories receive the results for their own factory, which they can share with various organisations they are attached to, to help improve their standing in the industry and amongst their potential customers. Organisations like the Fair Wear Foundation will receive aggregate data for all the factories they monitor, which they can use in their campaigns and marketing strategies. The Brands using these factories will receive newsletters and updates to help them integrate the results of this programme into their sustainability policy. As you can see the most compelling element of this scheme is collaboration as it not only produces shared purpose and reduced costs but also increased efficacy as it allows the data to be used in a number of places within the supply chain. Parties taking part in this programme will need to commit for the long term which is 5 -10 years to see progressive change, which acts as a guarantee for its own success.

Sustainability

How we would bring about participation

Our first port of call would be NGOs already working with factories striving to be more ethical, we would like to work together with organisations like the ETI, The Fair Wear Foundation, FTA, BSI, bsci etc. Other avenues would be supply chain auditors, bodies and organisations that advise and work together with ethical brands and owners of garment factories. We believe the early engagement of these organisations at the questionnaire design stage would encourage their participation at survey uptake. We also believe the collaboration of academics and others that are interested in seeing this type of progress within the Bangladeshi ready-made garment industry would be a stamp of approval for our programme and promote credibility.

Methodology

Bangladesh though known to have a poor population has a very high mobile phone penetration which could possibly allow us to run an online survey. However due to low levels of education it might be necessary that we improvise how the interviews are conducted. It could be that we have face to face interviews but in a group setting and we also incorporate paper versions for those that may not have mobile phones. We would design the survey according to the specific factory population needs. Both versions of the questionnaire ie paper and online would be produced.

There would also be very strict administration of the survey to avoid any possible misrepresentation and ensure the integrity of the data. This may mean that the whole factory take part in the survey at the same time to avoid any sharing of information/responses.

Questionnaire design

The questionnaire is the pivotal element of the programme, as it has to capture all the necessary information required to evaluate and measure not only the levels of awareness but also levels of engagement and the correlation between the two. It has to contain the right subject matter, what do these workers need to be aware of to be empowered enough to bring about the necessary results for their benefit? What kind of engagement is necessary to bring about the desired change and what kind of engagement is socially acceptable and possible within the current context? The designing of this questionnaire would require some initial research, information and input from various sources, such as factory owners, factory managers, labour force specialists in Bangladesh this could be academics, recruiters, NGO's eg Fair Wear Foundation,

employment lawyers and even possibly government ministers together with secondary data we can find. The initial stage of research will therefore be a focus group, where a number of these potential participants will be invited to take part in a discussion. We would video the focus group to ensure all the data is captured and information gleaned to create our employee questionnaire. A second focus group will then provide the opportunity to evaluate the draft version of our questionnaire and again feed-back any further insights or suggestions. The final version will be piloted in one factory to ensure its smooth running. The questionnaire will need to be adaptable and long lasting so it can be repeated a number of times with minor changes to measure levels of change.

Time frame

Year 1

The initial set up for this project will take 12 months, as this will require extensive research and networking. It will require one to one conversations with a number of parties before focus groups are set up, also the creation of bespoke databases and a continuous communication network to allow for discussion and participation. However by the end of the year, we would have gained the group of partners we require, have designed a questionnaire that can be used and adapted for the next 5 years on a biannual basis and have the results from our first survey.

Year one would have used the investment available to set up but we will have a target of creating an income of £30,000 from all the subscription fees.

Year 2

The second year will see costs reduced considerably as the questionnaire will only need to be amended slightly to reflect any findings from the previous survey and changes made by the factories. The goal for this year are:

- Continually growing the number of stakeholders ie, factories, NGO's and brands taking part in the scheme.
- Continued communication in promoting the scheme and encouraging implementation of the results amongst stakeholders.
- Conducting the biannual surveys in all the factories within the scheme, data analysis and reporting back to relevant parties.
- Encouraging and organising factory visits for brands, NGO's and journalists etc to encourage transparency and raise profile of scheme
- Marketing results within the Bangladeshi ready-made garment industry
- Updating and informing brands through the newsletters and cooperate social responsibility reports
- Marketing campaign to promote scheme amongst consumers in collaboration with all parties involved.

Expected revenue target would be £60,000

Year 3, 4 and 5 will be a repeat of activities and schedule of year 2, with each year adding an incremental rise in turnover.

Team

Disni Jayasuriya the founder of Ethicologist.

BA (Hons) Economics & German

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I have been employed in the market research industry for the last 15 years. Having worked for agencies like TNS, Research International, NOP, IPSOS Mori, and a number of smaller companies in consumer and B2B research I decided to bring all my experience to invest in the ethical fashion industry. We currently run ad hoc surveys to help companies address their social responsibility aspirations, meet sustainability targets and engage with ethical apparel. We also provide syndicated surveys allowing small brands to buy into big data with a small budget.

As a small start-up we would be looking to contract the required specialties as and when they are required.