

The French footwear industry is depending on a younger generation to preserve its shoemaking know-how.

CREDIT: GORDANA DIMITRIJEVIC



France fights for footwear future

In its white paper ahead of the presidential election in France, leather industry representative body the Conseil National du Cuir (CNC) declared that French companies have stepped up their efforts to recruit young people who are trained in the leather professions. In particular, it highlighted that the footwear sector is looking for young employees to replace the "large number of staff reaching retirement age". Frank Boehly, president of the CNC, tells *World Footwear* there is a "particularly urgent need" for fresh blood in the leather industry. He says it is "imperative" to recruit young people, as well as adults looking for a career change, if France's leather know-how is to be preserved. For his part, the president of the French Footwear Association, Claude-Eric Paquin, acknowledges that many of its members find it hard to anticipate their training needs in relation to the retirement of senior staff. He adds that they often realise too late, which can cause "a major problem".

"Existing training courses, although very numerous, are not always well-adapted and are located far from the regions where the jobs are situated," the CNC states. That isn't to say that the courses are ineffective in general, according to Mr Paquin. "France has several schools which prepare students for the various positions that shoe companies can offer," he explains.

France's footwear industry is searching for a new generation of shoemakers to take over from those who are soon to retire.

The Centre Technique du Cuir (CTC), France's leather and footwear testing institute, offers "specific educational programmes" for employees of members of the French Footwear Association, he continues, which cover all aspects of the industry and are "generally appreciated". Mr Boehly says while those in post-18 education can study a course called "Fashion, footwear and leathergoods profession", nothing currently exists for students between the ages of 16 and 18.

In-house initiatives

Some of France's leading footwear brands have taken the future of their workforce into their own hands. One such example is JM Weston, which has been running its own training academy since 2011. The company employs around 10 new craftspeople



Frank Boehly, president of the Conseil National du Cuir, says young French people are still interested in becoming leather artisans. CREDIT: CONSEIL NATIONAL DU CUIR

each year. The academy is designed to transmit the “exceptional know-how” of French shoemakers to the next generation. “Artisanal know-how involves a set of exceptional skills that enable the craftsman to offer unique products of unequalled quality,” emphasises Christopher Descours, president of JM Weston. It works in partnership with Les Compagnons du Devoir, an organisation with a long history of passing on artisanal skills and techniques in France, to provide post-secondary school training and work programmes for young French people.

Les Compagnons du Devoir assists another high-end company in its pursuit of fresh talent. Luxury group LVMH, which owns brands including Berluti, Dior and Loewe, launched its Institut des Métiers d’Excellence (IME) initiative in 2014. The scheme aims to pass on the savoir-faire and flair needed to make luxury products, including leathersgoods. Each year, LVMH gives apprentices the opportunity to work closely with master artisans from several of its Maisons. It is supported in this endeavour by vocational schools from across Paris; Les Compagnons du Devoir helps to deliver the leathersgoods training for the Louis Vuitton Maison. In 2016, the initiative welcomed a record number of apprentices—178.

Mr Paquin points out it is smaller companies that are most affected by problems related to training. “This is likely to last,” he warns. The larger brands are able to fund their own programmes, which means they depend less on external institutions. However, he doesn’t think companies are entitled to complain about the costs of training as the courses offered by the CTC, for example, are “below market prices”. Instead, he says a key complaint from the industry is the availability of training sessions, which is due to a scarcity of people with the skills to deliver them effectively.

Fresh faces

The CNC is planning to develop a “general leather training course” with the aim of attracting young people to the industry and equipping them with the knowledge they need to succeed within it. It would comprise core training in general leather skills, followed by modules related to specialised fields such as leathersgoods, footwear or glove making. These fields would be dictated by the requirements of the industry and the ability of the students. The courses would be delivered by the CTC, as well as teachers from the public and private sector. Mr Boehly tells *World Footwear* that there is not a “precise timetable” for putting this initiative in place, but he concedes it will be a “very long process” and will require approval from France’s ministry of education.

If one takes the issue of the suitability and accessibility of training programmes out of the equation, the big question is whether young French people actually want to become expert leather craftspeople or artisan shoemakers. Mr Boehly believes they do; he says the “craft professions” are beginning to interest young people again, as well as those looking to change career slightly later in life. The CNC is trying to attract them through a larger presence on social media, increased marketing efforts, and more presentations in schools and at careers fairs. For its part, the French Footwear Association organises biannual meetings between representatives from the leather industry and students to encourage them to join the profession and to make them aware of the opportunities that are available.

France’s footwear exports increased 8% in 2016, continuing the positive trend of recent years. This suggests a larger workforce is required, even before the number of people nearing retirement is taken into account. As well as satisfying this growing demand, new training initiatives are crucial to ensuring that the art of French shoemaking is preserved. 📌



General leather skills would be the core component of the Conseil National du Cuir’s proposed training course.

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