

Energy Made-to-Measure

How to foster energy efficiency to lower textile companies cost?



Mauro Scalia
Euratex
Brussels/Belgium

More than 172,000 textile and clothing companies are based in the European Union (EU) employing 1.6 million people and generating over € 165 billion of turnover; last year some 43 billions-worth products were exported outside the EU. These figures clearly show the textile and apparel industry as a widespread and sizeable European business activity which contributes to the economic growth of the old continent while dressing, sustaining and protecting both people and other industries alike. That is all true, yet what figures cannot as easily show is how many cost-cutting pressures exit all along the value chain where businesses constantly need to be more resource efficient to cope with fierce competition, legislation and rising costs. Sustainability has also become a matter of priority for many companies and even more consumers, making it a pity that investing into a more sustainable production is also yet another cost.

Energy is a relevant cost. In textile wet processes like textile finishing or dyeing energy can hit as much as 30 % of the company total costs at the current price levels. In the near future the European public policies aim at further reducing CO₂ emissions of 40 % while increasing energy saving to at least 27 % by 2030. This is likely to impact in all industry sectors, however it is likely in business where most of the companies are SMEs that such policies have more difficulties to be adopted on the grounds of limited information and resources.

Some 99 % of the European textile and apparel companies are SMEs, and these can hardly employ skilled energy managers or distract the staff from core business to quantify potential savings and seek opportunities.

Indeed the influential IEA points out that „efficiency investment is lagging because of a lack of information, resources, technical expertise and funding“ (IEA: International Energy Agency: Accelerating Energy Efficiency in Small and Medium-sized Enterprises, 12.2015).

A major attempt to gather forces and un-tap saving potential is being made with Energy Made-to-Measure (EM2M) an information campaign running for 2 years across Europe. Launched and managed by the European Textile and Clothing Confederation (Euratex) in collaboration with dozens of European organizations, the campaign delivers tools, experts' recommendation, info and training directly to companies for managers to take informed decisions on energy efficiency.

In the first 2 years (2014-2015) more than 700 professionals have been addressed in 30 public meetings and bilateral visits in 10 European countries to deal with energy efficiency from different perspectives including its perception versus realities. Discussions have been focused on the results of 3 international projects tailored for textile/clothing manufacturing (Artisan, Sesecc and Set) and 2 initiatives focused on resource efficiency in the sector, namely the Blue Competence initiative launched by the German Textile Machinery Association (VDMA) and the Sustainable Technologies project launched by the Association of Italian Machinery Manufacturers (ACIMIT).

The Sesecc project has for instance already supported 45 companies to use an ad-hoc self-assessment tool and assessing best practices eventually supporting investments on energy efficiency for about € 1.5 million. Estimates indicate 1,000,000 kWh/year of savings have already achieved with additional 7,000,000 kWh/year expected. The on-going Set project has recently rolled out the ESET, a self-assessment tool tailored on textile manufacturing processes and which has already been tested by over 50 companies with further 100 companies planned to be supported in 2016.

Results are made available to even wider audiences by a new version of the EM2M web platform which allows company to access information on legal obligations and financial incentives in 10 countries and overall at EU levels, to access recommendation and to use self-assessment tools designed for either apparel or textile manufacturing processes.

2 years into the campaign, activities have shown a growing interest on energy and how important critical mass is to enable companies to size the energy efficiency potential. Collaboration between sectorial experts, energy experts, national authorities, media and local support organizations is proving to be instrumental. Field experiences also show that: most managers are not aware of actual consumption or real saving potential; the path to achieve energy efficiency shall be simplified; best practices, guidance and tools shall be sector-specific as energy features vary greatly both within textile manufacturing and with other industries; benchmarking is only meaningful (and possible) within peer companies and it can really help the entrepreneurs to consider and finally profit from the right choices.