

## The circular economy is creating demand for new talent

'Knowing your supply chain gives you the power to do good,' says Meriel Chamberlin, Founder of Full Circle Fibres and member of the Australian Government's Cross Sector Supply Chain Skills Project Reference Group.

Yet, the compulsion to get everything for the lowest price or to produce something as cheaply as possible is still hardwired into today's commerce. Things are, however, beginning to shift as environmental conditions force change and consumers become more discerning. Buyers want to know that the person who made their T-shirt did so under decent working conditions, that the farm where the fibre was grown paid their workers properly. People are also realising that retail prices need to account for the costs of water and carbon.

Profit and loss spreadsheets don't tell the whole story of success and failure. Behind this sit information about inventory, size ratios and price points. The origin of fibre, ingredients in a dye, transportation choices can now be traced and audited. But to be useful these data need someone with the right experience and mindset to analyse them and marry them to less tangible information about political influences on labour practices or well-informed hunches about the next big thing. Such talent is born from a mix of skills training, experience on-the-job, flair and commitment to excellence. In procurement, it's what all employers should be looking for.

Tracing all these factors is complicated but essential, particularly as businesses become dependent on raw materials, goods and services that are sourced across the globe. One glitch in finely distributed supply chains can be hugely disruptive. But at the moment, according to Meriel, too many managers see procurement as a low skill, routine task rather than an increasingly sophisticated role central not only to greater profitability but also to positioning a company as an ethical and environmentally responsible business. She argues that supply chain skills are relevant not only in transport and logistics but also in other generic business and marketing qualifications, as well as in specific sectors like her own, the fashion industry.

*'These days, not to have people with higher order skills who can understand the system governing a supply chain, poses a significant business risk. In today's just-in-time procurement systems, an unexpected disruption – the closure of a road or a border, for example – can spell disaster. It's a talented, curious human being, not the software, that will be able either to anticipate the problem or start to solve it.'*





The Australian Government's Cross Sector Supply Chain Skills Project was set up to respond to the growing demand across the economy for people who understand supply chains. It has developed a set of training products that can be adapted to various industries and that offers learners the option to study a full qualification or a micro-credential to help them get up to speed with the complexity of contemporary supply and logistics networks and state-of-the-art procurement practices.

It's not only the inputs that producers, manufacturers and consumers need to know about. In fact, it's probably easier for many to start by understanding what happens to a product at the end of its life. Is it built to last or to be repaired, has it been designed for disassembly? Can it be recycled? Is it compostable or reusable in a new product? Where: at home or offshore?

All these questions are as integral to the circular economy as those about provenance. Uncovering the intricacies of a product's lifecycle, and the accuracy of the data behind the claims, reveals the importance of designing it well in the first place, making it fit for purpose and planning its demise. All this has the potential to save money as well as helping the planet.

This power to have a positive impact lies with all purchasing decisions, but big business and governments can show the way. The people who scope and place orders for a new company uniform or for conference satchels or the army's combat jackets should be nurtured as key personnel. Doing their job well requires strong contextual knowledge, skills in data analytics, a proper understanding of the systems that are producing the information, and the nous even to be able to read the runes.



Meriel Chamberlin

