



THE ASSOCIATION & VOICE OF THE US SEWN PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

MILLENNIAL CORNER:

Leaning on from-the-ground-up experience is creating mutual ROI

**By Chase Johnson
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I work for Contempora Fabrics in Lumberton, NC, in a sales and account management role, among other things. Our team at Contempora will proudly tell you we all wear many hats.

We are a small, yet very dynamic company; flexibility and resilience have been paramount in our company's success and rich history as we celebrate our 50th anniversary this year. Contempora is a circular knit fabric manufacturer offering contract knitting, greige packages, as well as finished fabric with a wide product mix.

My road to the textile industry was relatively nontraditional, although direct in the sense that I didn't formally study textiles – yet I was immediately drawn to the relationship-driven environment textiles provided. The relationship-centric environment, coupled with a product manufacturing aspect, appealed to me while most of my friends and fellow students were involved with more traditional areas of focus, mainly in business services industries.

There is something really special about producing a tangible product that you can touch and feel. Textile manufacturing offers elements of creativity and collaboration both in developing bespoke fabrics for small specialty runs, and large-volume production. It's challenging yet rewarding to see our fabrics come to life in so many different ways.

My textile journey began on the tail end of my college career. I joined the student advisory board while studying at the undergraduate School of Business at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, where I helped pilot an internship program in conjunction with surrounding business leaders also serving on the board. I had an opportunity to connect with Contempora's leadership through my internship with them during the summer of my senior year.

Most of my conversations with our president, Ron Roach, and our vice president of Sales, Alex Whitley, leading up to my internship revolved around my excitement to get into the weeds of the business. Sitting in our conference room in a suit and tie for the internship interview, I had all the answers as any naïve business student straight out of a management class would – the world was my oyster.

Days before I was to report for my first day, Ron told me I might want to wear blue jeans. I found that interesting. Although I didn't think much of it, I would soon find out why. I spent the



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next month on the knitting floor tying in yarn, creeling machines, working on style changes with mechanics, inspecting defects and tossing 40-pound rolls into containers and trucks destined for dye houses.

Like many college-age kids with a fairly strenuous workout routine and an active lifestyle, I thought tossing rolls eight feet in the air on a loading dock would be no issue – wrong again. I was asleep most nights that summer by 8 p.m. Halfway through my first week, Alex returned from a customer visit to check on me. “How’s the internship going?” he asked. Wearing a lifting belt, catching my breath I responded, “Not quite what I expected!” In short, I learned a valuable lesson the internship was designed to teach me.

Contempora is an employee-owned company (ESOP), and everyone I got to know on our manufacturing floor has a vested interest in our organization. It was imperative for me not only to appreciate what administration asks of our employees but to build relationships with them. I constantly learn from our management team what it means to appreciate our employees and foster a company culture.

I spent the remaining weeks of my internship in our office learning about scheduling, accounting, converting, sales, logistics, HR and quality control from each department. I later joined Contempora full time in a sales role, equipped with a from-the-ground-up experience that I could lean on. I owe that to both my on-the-floor experience as well as the unprecedented access to senior management with a lifetime of experience.

As a Millennial in the textile industry, I’m fortunate to have had success in my role building relationships with our customers and suppliers. Those relationships have materialized into profitable programs and important relationships for Contempora. That became particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when we pivoted into PPE production, an industry we continue to service.

In any successful organization, savvy management involves recognizing and investing in younger talent in hopes of realizing a return on that investment. I’m no longer the youngest member of our organization, and we continue to make those investments in younger employees, both current and prospective. I’m fortunate to be a part of an organization that subscribes to that logic; my success is a direct result of that.

Millennials are sometimes perceived as having “fleeting” commitments to employers. Loyalty that has been inherent to other generations is often replaced with a spirit of instant gratification in Millennials. Admittedly, that perception is somewhat warranted, although in my experience, Millennials with access to the time and resources of senior management are far more likely to feel a responsibility to fulfill their commitment to an organization that invests in them.

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I believe it's my responsibility to do everything I can each day to make sure I'm holding up my end of the bargain, to create a return on that investment. I attribute those convictions to the people I work with and the culture around me.

My access to industry organizations such as SEAMS and others have provided opportunities to grow my network and learn from incredibly successful people. I had the pleasure of listening to and spending time with executive chairman of Unifi, Al Carey, at the SEAMS Annual Conference last year. Carey spoke articulately about the investments Unifi was making in training and in younger management, as well as their commitments to company culture. I left that experience feeling inspired, determined, invested in.

I am proud to be in the textile industry with such great people, and I look forward to many more generations "drinking the Kool-Aid."