

Joint circular procurement of workwear requires time and patience

Every year, billions of kilograms of workwear are discarded, burned or destroyed. This has to change according to the companies TBI and Dura Vermeer and grid operator Alliander. In 2015 they started a pilot to make workwear circular, with the support of Rijkswaterstaat, REBus and MVO Nederland. This has turned out to be a growth process requiring patience and an open mind.

The safety vest seemed a good convenient product to start with on a small scale. But this proved to be more difficult in practice. David Mannessen, buyer at Alliander, explains: "There are multi-standards for our safety clothing: antistatic, flame retardant, waterproof, resistant to chemicals, etc. This makes it difficult for the vests to be circular. It is difficult to recycle the raw materials and to process these into new clothing that meets the same high standards."

Another stumbling block was the volume. If you produce 1,000 circular vests per company, as was the idea, then this is prohibitively expensive and no supplier will agree to such an order. And with only three companies in the pilot there are no larger orders.

What also plays a role is that the costs of recycling the safety vest and bringing it back into the chain, weigh heavily on a relatively inexpensive product as a safety vest. The costs incurred in order to revert the item to yarn are still unclear and are estimated to be an extra cost of 10% to 20%.

Search for producers

Dura Vermeer and TBI therefore finally decided to start with a broader range of workwear. Purchasing Manager Bjorn Smeets of Dura Vermeer describes how he experienced the search for producers. "At first I thought: we should just inform the market and they would do the work. Instead, we had to take the lead ourselves. For example, to find reusable substances. The chain is made up of a huge number of links to one another, with many interconnections. For example, a producer may have a small share in a weaving mill in the Far East. Realising transparency and openness throughout the entire chain proved to be a challenge.

Alliander buyer Mannessen explains that when searching for a supplier he is not particularly interested in the price but rather in the cost of circular workwear. "Where do these come from? I want to end up paying for the value. For that you have to include the whole life cycle of a garment in the costs and ultimately the multiple cycles that it can go through. It proved difficult to make this transparent."

Product Manager Arco Vroegindeweyj of Croowolter&dros (part of TBI) adds: "You assume that it is possible to bring clothing that is made with present day knowledge and techniques back into the chain. But no one knows exactly what that costs. Even if you know the costs, you still have some way to go. What about the market prices of basic commodities in three years' time? That has a big impact on the value of the clothing."

It took a lot of getting used to this mind shift, Smeets reports. "Previously, workwear was a catalogue item. Until you have a sustainability goal. Then you really have to fully delve into the business case of your contract partner or the chain."

Complicated collection process

The collection of used clothing is also an issue. Not all clothing can be given a second life, Mannessen points out. "For example, some clothing includes a mixed material that we cannot pick apart. You also need to figure out in detail: what is the quality and particularly what is the degree of contamination? For instance, at Dura Vermeer the clothing is contaminated by asphalt and concrete splashes and our clothing is contaminated by oil. That has an impact on the process."

Smeets of Dura Vermeer outlines a follow-up question: "If you have clothing produced in Asia but your recycle flow is here, how you link this together? And does an old garment become a new garment or is it reused somewhere else? You have to form an opinion about this."

Contracts for packages of workwear

Despite all the challenges huge steps have been taken. In 2015 after approximately one year, Dura Vermeer gave three market parties instructions for the further development of a soft shell, a parka and rain trousers of which 85% of the material can be reused. Intersafe leads the project, Dutch Awareness is the director and Tricorp is the producer. TBI joined the project this year. Alliander strives for 100% circularity in due course and wants to call for tenders in the market in 2017.

Not all the thresholds have been resolved. Especially the lack of understanding of the processes at the supplier remains a problem. For this reason, Dura Vermeer and TBI are pleased with Dutch Awareness as a director. Another point is that circular thinking still has to filter through to the workplace. Mannessen: "The employees must abandon the idea: just throw it away if it's broken. It should be returned to the workplace and placed in a container with a label on it. It takes a lot of time to get people to 'go along with' this." TBI has come a long way: simply by asking for cooperation, 15 tonnes of clothing has already been returned. But that is not all of what is discarded.

In addition, the costing details must be clearer. The safety standards also require continuous attention. Oil stain processing is hopeful: other companies such as BAM, Heijmans and Volker Wessels are already participating. This was taken into account at an early stage. Smeets: "We have specifically not said: there must be Dura Vermeer piping. It had to be a standard product." Alliander also sees opportunities, according to Mannessen: "We are a large enough party for the market to take the step to develop this. In the future, it is a very good idea if other grid operators also join."

Openness

That the three partners have already come so far is largely due to their perseverance and above all: their openness. Vroegindeweyj: "What I found really special to experience is that we all have said: we have confidence in this. We are all part of the learning process, but based on much less rational arguments than are usual for a procurement decision." Mannessen agrees: "You operate with each other in a chain, communicate openly and help each other. You don't just want to watch each other at work, but also to take part in each other's work. This requires a different approach than traditional business."

GDCI & REBus

The circular clothing pilot is part of the Green Deal on Circular Procurement (GDCI): an initiative of MVO Nederland, NEVI, the Government, Duurzame Leverancier, PIANOo, Kirkman Company and Circle Economy. The GDCI and several pilots were co-financed by the European project Rebus and implemented by Rijkswaterstaat in the Netherlands. Together they are committed to supporting entrepreneurs and governments in their goals for circular procurement. More information can be found at [website of PIANOo](#).