

# Technology Is Coming for the Fashion Industry—Whether They Like It or Not



There were some seriously powerful voices heard at this year’s Fashion Tech Forum. Speakers like Angela Ahrendts, Virgil Abloh and will.i.am shared a lot of insider insights, but one message was absolutely clear: the antiquated fashion industry that exists today needs some serious updating—right now—or it’ll be run over by the tech savvy.

Leave it to will.i.am to put it even more bluntly: “Fashion has not realized how their jobs are not going to be around 10-20 years from now,” said the rapper, musician, producer, TV personality and now tech entrepreneur. “[Fashion brands] better start thinking of how to bring new things to people or else the G is not going to be a freaking Gucci, that shit is going to be Google.”

The good news is that it’s not too late, yet. Insert Karen Harvey, the influential force in fashion that founded the Fashion Tech Forum in 2013 to bring fashion and tech leaders together. Fast forward four years later, and the industry is finally ready for her: “Honestly, back then the technology side thought fashion was easy and the typical fashion CEO didn’t really believe this was going to happen. Some did, but not all. But, what’s changed now is we’re all here.”

Karen Harvey on stage at the 4th Annual Fashion Tech Forum Conference in Los Angeles, CA on October 6, 2017.  
Graylock/Fashion Tech Forum

And we need each other. “No one company, no one person has it all .... We’re interdependent,” said Harvey. It’s that need for partnerships that led her to Flex, the company that reportedly makes about 75 percent of the world’s wearables and has offered tech

solutions for fashion legacy brands like Nike and tech giants like Google. Fortunately, Flex is eager to be the software update to the fashion world’s hardware. “Technology needs the creation that comes from art and fashion to really make the whole thing work. People want to have a look and feel and be inspired by what they’re wearing,” said Mike Dennison, President of Consumer Technologies Group at Flex.

But with so much noise in the space, it can be difficult for both fashion and tech brands alike to know what to pay attention to. The best advice on how to deal with that conundrum came from one of the first leaders to make the leap from fashion to tech, Angela Ahrendts. “I think everything will.i.am and Flex said is true. Everything is going to be smart. Everything ... if your shoes aren’t, your closet will be and you can’t stop that. [But] you have to stay in your lane. You can’t do everything, pick one thing that is relevant for your brand.”

Beyond staying laser-focused on what makes sense for your brand, it’s also about investing in people. “My job is to learn and to grow and listen and build incredible teams of people that do so much more than I do,” Ahrendts commented. That same sentiment was echoed by almost every speaker on the floor. Will.i.am described the need to have “an assembly of minds” and Harvey generously credited her millennially in-tune cofounder Maia Wojcik, as the secret to their success. “She’s, the future ... it’s about having both generations and you need that. Companies need that.”

In addition to making space for diverse talent, you’ve also got to listen to the other party that has recently entered the board room, the consumer. “What I’m finding is the first mistake is trying to brainstorm ideas in a meeting amongst employees. That is always leading off on the wrong foot,” explained Virgil Abloh, who took to the stage to discuss his most recent partnership with IKEA. “The consumer has the right answer.” And Abloh’s IKEA counterpart, Henrik Most couldn’t agree more: “It’s important for us to make totally clear that we’re not designing something for a young millennial we’re doing it together with



them .... we need to be aware that as a company we don't own the truth.”

Letting go of old notions of control and taking chances is the only way forward. “Lots of stuff we think about may not work but if you don't think about it and try to create it then it won't happen,” said Dennison who warned that if companies don't try, they will most certainly get disrupted by the tech giants. Will.i.am immediately followed up with his own philosophy on failing: “I want to learn, and the only way to learn is to taste the ground .... And you cannot be afraid of that because it's going to keep you freaking going.”

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Which brings us back to where we started: we all need to keep moving or we will get left behind. A point that will.i.am made ever clear with this analogy: “In 2006, phones were phones ... then the iPhone came and changed it all. They weren't even phone makers. But they took the lunch, the dinner, the breakfast, the house of all the phone makers because they created a platform that changed everyone's concept of what a phone is ... And [the fashion disruptor will be] the unlikely candidate that never made apparel - a jacket, a bag, a hat, or glasses. That will be the new norm. And that is the urgency. If you don't see that coming then you're an opossum. An opossum, when they see the bright lights come, they just stand and get hit.”