

BUSINESS

The Fashion and Tech Industries' Must-Have? Talent

As the Industries Converge, They Are Competing Increasingly for Similar Hires

"We are at a critical juncture for fashion, technology and retail," said Karen Harvey, head of Karen Harvey Consulting Group. GETTY IMAGES

By Andria Cheng

June 27, 2014 1:03 p.m. ET

Fashion and technology are coming together in a surprising way.

They aren't just sharing ideas. They are actively trying to poach each other's talent.

Google's recent hire of Ivy Ross, a former Gap, Coach and Mattel executive, to head its Glass unit, and Apple's well-publicized hire of former Burberry chief Angela Ahrendts to lead its retail business, are two examples.

Nike Inc. has grabbed talent from giant tech firms including Facebook, Yahoo and Microsoft.

Wal-Mart Stores Inc., for its part, recently bought a localized mobile shopping app Stylr only to shut it down—its true motive for the purchase was to acquire the app's two founders, who are Stanford alumni.

"We are at a critical juncture for fashion, technology and retail," said Karen Harvey, head of Karen Harvey Consulting Group, a retail and fashion executive consulting and recruiting firm. "The war just got bigger for talent. Neither sector is necessarily at a place where you are grooming the right talent to build a sustainable brand for the future."

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retailers, including Target, American Eagle Outfitters and Wal-Mart have set up tech offices in Silicon Valley.

"In one year, I spent a good half a year in Silicon Valley to meet a lot of people down there," said Michael Leming, Chief Talent Scout at Beaverton, Ore.-based Nike, in an interview.

Nike has made more than 300 hires in the last year for its digital team, mostly from Silicon Valley. "There's this morphing" between fashion and technology, Mr. Leming said.

The hires are being tapped to develop digital devices to offer athletes more real-time, personalized feedback on their performance, Nike Chief Executive Mark Parker said on a conference call Thursday.

Like other brands, Nike wants to expand its e-commerce business. The company was awarded 540 patents for different innovations in the past year. It recently named eBay Chief Executive John Donahoe to its board.

Recruiter Ms. Harvey, whose executive placements include Lululemon's new CEO Laurent Potdevin and Gap Creative Director Rebekka Bay, said her firm now regularly gets approached by the tech world and startups about hiring fashion talent. Meanwhile, many top fashion executives are seeking her advice on whether they should jump ship to become "tech entrepreneurs," because they are being wooed by that world.

Ms. Harvey made the comments Wednesday at the inaugural "Fashion Tech Forum," an event she founded and that brought together more than 400 attendees and presenters, including fashion retailers and brands such as Nike, Nordstrom, Coach and Gap, at Pier59 Studios in New York City.

Nancy Tilbury, a fashion scientist, founder and creative director of Studio XO, which created performer Lady Gaga's 3-D printed white dress that makes bubbles, joined a panel to discuss the future of clothing and how outfits in science fiction are no longer a

figment of the imagination.

A contest featuring three tech startups was judged by a panel including Coach's Executive Chairman and former CEO Lew Frankfort ; Gap's Bay; and angel investor David Tisch, a managing director at BoxGroup, which has invested in such brands as Vine and Warby Parker.

Rank & Style, which uses an algorithm to create top-10 lists in various beauty and fashion categories, won the "Founders of the Future Award" challenge, garnering a \$50,000 prize and a six-week "intense" mentorship.

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