Competitiveness first: why automation matters for textiles

EURATEX perspective | Session 3: Fostering Industry Competitiveness, Needs and Opportunities

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Closing the Automation Gap: Robotics for Textile Handling in Europe | 18/06/2026

The industry context: pressure to transform

European textiles are industrially relevant, but the transition must work for a sector dominated by SMEs.

194k	1.2m	€166bn	99.8%
companies	workers	turnover	SMEs

A fragmented value chain with strong regional clusters, specialised firms and many first-time adopters of advanced technologies.

Main competitiveness pressures

Global competition

Quality, speed and flexibility, not lowest cost.

Labour shortages

Scarcity of skilled labour and ageing workforce.

Circularity and DPP

DPP, sorting and recycling need reliable data.

Productivity pressure

Faster cycles, fewer defects, better resource use.

Source: EURATEX Facts & Figures 2026, DigitX Strategic Roadmap and Textiles of the Future SRIA.

Innovation is the route to competitiveness

Robotisation is one lever within a wider industrial transformation agenda.

Competitiveness challenge	Innovation response	Industrial outcome
Cost pressure Volatile demand Labour shortages Circularity obligations	Digitalisation AI and data Automation Robotisation Advanced materials Skills	Higher productivity Better quality More flexible production Circular and traceable value chains

What this means for EURATEX

Our role is to help ensure that innovation reaches companies through funding, skills, partnerships and a policy framework that recognises the textile ecosystem.

Funding | **Skills** | **Partnerships** | **Deployment** | **SME access** | **Industrial policy**

Why automation can become a competitiveness factor

The value is not the robot itself, but what it enables for European companies.

1 **Productivity and quality**

AI inspection, monitoring and repeatable tasks can reduce defects and improve resource efficiency.

2 **Labour and ergonomics**

Automation can support workers by taking over repetitive, unsafe or physically demanding tasks.

3 **Circularity infrastructure**

Sorting, material recognition and recycling preparation need automated and data-supported processes.

4 **Flexible production**

On-demand and small-batch manufacturing become more realistic when production is more digital and automated.

The opportunity is not to compete on lowest cost. It is to compete on quality, speed, flexibility, sustainability and advanced manufacturing.

The real gap is deployment readiness

Textile automation is difficult because the material, the companies and the supply chains are different.

Fabric is not metal.

It stretches, folds, deforms and changes from product to product.

Technology maturity

Some processes are close to uptake; fabric handling and sewing remain harder.

Investment risk

High cost and uncertain return on investment delay adoption.

Integration

Solutions must work with legacy machines, ERP/MES systems and workflows.

Skills

Workers need textile knowledge plus data, automation and digital competences.

The missing link is often not invention, but uptake in real factories.

What EURATEX does to support this transition

Our role is to build the policy, funding and cooperation conditions for innovation uptake.

1. Funding and policy advocacy

Argue for EU programmes that connect research, scale-up and industrial deployment, including Horizon Europe and the proposed European Competitiveness Fund within the next MFF.

2. Textiles of the Future Partnership

Supported the creation of a dedicated partnership under Horizon Europe, with R&I priorities including automated and AI-supported smart manufacturing.

3. Networks and roadmaps

Work with Textile ETP and partners through initiatives such as DigitX to connect companies, researchers, technology providers and policymakers.

The Textiles of the Future allocates at least €60m in public and private funding in the initial 2025-2027 phase, focused on higher TRLs and industrial deployment.

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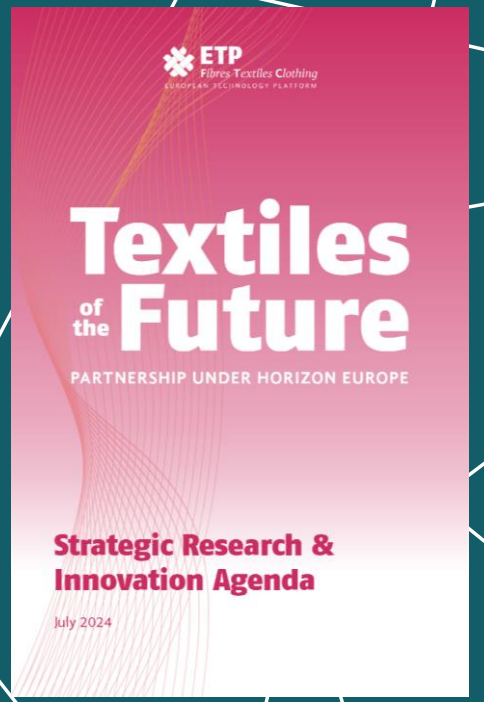

Thank you